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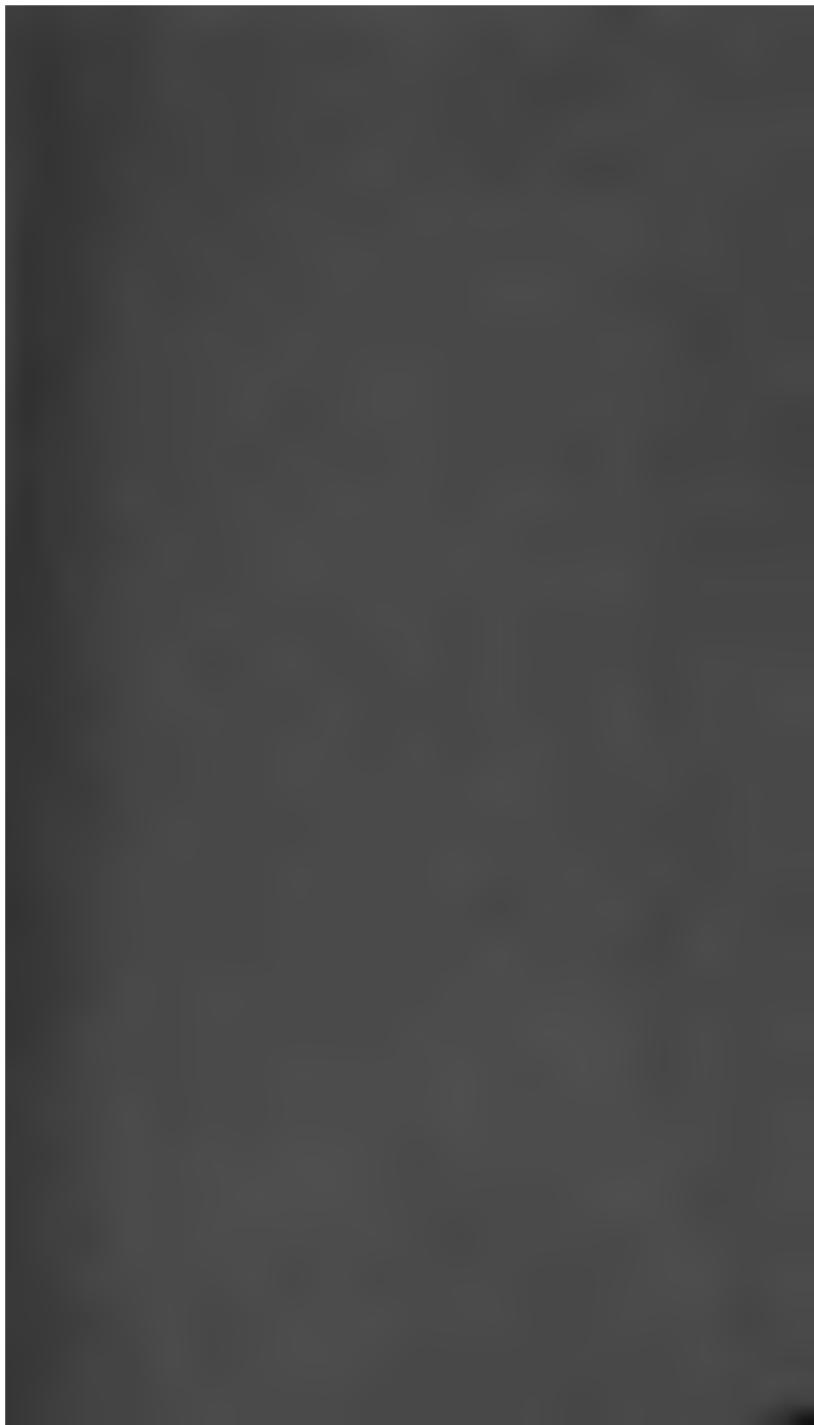
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BASIL:
A STORY OF MODERN LIFE.

BY W. WILKIE COLLINS,
AUTHOR OF
"ANTONINA," "RAMBLES BEYOND RAILWAYS," &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
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PART II.

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VOL. II.

B



BASIL.

I.

AN epoch in my narrative has now arrived. Up to the time of my marriage, I have appeared as an active agent in the different events I have described. After that period, and—with one or two exceptional cases—throughout the whole year of my probation, my position changed with the change in my life, and became a passive one.

During this interval year, certain accidents and events happened, some of which, at the time, excited my curiosity, but none my apprehension—some affected me with a temporary disappointment, but none with even a momentary suspicion. I can now look back, on them, as so many friendly warnings which I fatally misunderstood, or fatally overlooked—warnings invisible then, to eyes that were treacherously blinded beforehand by love. Throughout the whole of that period, I walked on surely, step by step, to the verge of the abyss; and never once suspected what course I was taking, never once detected the signs which vainly arose to caution me back; on either side of my path.

It is in these warning events that the history of the long year through which I waited to claim my wife as my own, is really comprised. They marked the lapse

of time broadly and significantly ; and to them I must now confine myself, as exclusively as may be, in the present portion of my narrative. I shall thus most fitly and most briefly illustrate a passage in my life which was essentially, when compared with what was to succeed it, a passage of repose —that worst, deceitful repose, under which the elements of convulsion gather, and lurk unseen.

It will be first necessary, however, that I should describe what was the nature of my intercourse with Margaret, during the probationary period which followed our marriage.

Mr. Sherwin's anxiety was to limit my visits to North Villa as much as possible : he evidently feared the consequences of my seeing his daughter too often. But on this point, I was resolute enough in asserting my own interests, to overpower any resist-

ance on his part. I required him to concede to me the right of seeing Margaret every day—leaving all arrangements of time to depend on his own convenience. After the due number of objections, he reluctantly acquiesced in my demand. I was bound by no engagement whatever, in regard to the frequency of my visits to Margaret; and I let him see at the outset, that I was now ready, in my turn, to impose conditions on him, as he had already imposed them on me.

Accordingly, it was settled that Margaret and I were to meet every day. I usually saw her in the evening. When any alteration in the hour of my visit took place, that alteration was produced by the necessity (which we all recognised alike) of avoiding a meeting with any of Mr. Sherwin's friends, as frequently as was practicable.

Those portions of the day or the evening which I spent with Margaret, were seldom passed altogether in the elysian idleness of love. Not content with only enumerating his daughter's school-accomplishments to me at our first interview, Mr. Sherwin boastfully referred to them again and again, on many subsequent occasions ; and even obliged Margaret to show off before me some of her knowledge of languages—which he never forgot to remind us had been lavishly paid for out of his own pocket. It was at one of these exhibitions that the idea occurred to me of making a new pleasure for myself out of Margaret's society, by teaching her really to appreciate and enjoy the literature which she had evidently hitherto only studied as a task. My fancy revelled by anticipation in all the delights of such an employment as this. It would be like acting the story of Abelard and Heloise

over again — reviving all the poetry and romance in which those immortal love-studies of old had begun, with none of the guilt and none of the misery that had darkened and polluted their end.

I had a definite purpose, too, in wishing to assume the direction of Margaret's studies. Whenever the secret of my marriage was revealed, my pride was concerned in being able to show my wife to every one, as the all-sufficient excuse for any imprudence I might have committed for her sake. I was determined that my father, especially, should have no other argument against her than the one poor, selfish argument of her birth—that he should see her, fitted by the beauty of her mind, as well as by all her other beauties, for the highest station that society could offer to any woman. The thought of this gave me fresh ardour in my project; I assumed my new and

delightful duties without delay, and continued them with a happiness which never once suffered even a momentary decrease.

Of all the pleasures which a man finds in the society of a woman whom he loves, are there any superior, are there many equal, to the pleasure of reading out of the same book with her? On what other occasion do the sweet familiarities of the sweetest of all companionships, last so long without cloying, and pass and re-pass so naturally, so secretly, so inexhaustibly between you and her? When is your face so constantly close to her's, as it is then? —when can your hair mingle with her's, your cheek touch her's, your eyes meet her's, so often as they can then? That is, of all times, the only time when you can breathe with her breath for hours together, feel every little warming of the

colour on her cheek marking its own changes on the temperature of your's, follow every slight fluttering of her bosom, every faint gradation of her sighs, as if *her* heart was beating, *her* life glowing, within your's. Surely it is then—if ever—that we realize, almost revive, in ourselves, the love of the first two of our race, when angels walked with them on the same garden paths, and their hearts were pure from the pollution of the fatal tree !

Evening after evening passed away—one more happily than another—in what Margaret and I called our lessons. Never were lessons of literature so like lessons of love ! We read oftenest the lighter Italian poets—we studied the poetry of love, written in the language of love. But, as for the steady, utilitarian purpose I had proposed to myself of practically improving and enriching Margaret's intellect, that was a

purpose which insensibly and ~~deceitfully~~ abandoned me as completely as if it had never existed. The little serious, hard teaching I tried with her at first, led to very poor results. Perhaps, the lover interfered too much with the tutor: perhaps, I had over-estimated the fertility of the faculties I designed to cultivate—but I cared not, and thought not to inquire where the fault lay, then. I gave myself up unreservedly to the exquisite sensations which the mere act of looking on the same page with Margaret procured for me; and neither detected, nor wished to detect, that it was I who read the difficult passages, and left only a few even of the very easiest to be attempted by her.

Happily for my patience under the trial imposed on me by the terms on which Mr. Sherwin's restrictions, and my promise to obey them, obliged me to live with Mar-

garet, it was Mrs. Sherwin who was generally selected to remain in the room with us. By no one could such ungrateful duties of supervision as those imposed on her, have been more delicately and more considerately performed.

She always kept far enough away to be out of hearing when we whispered to each other. We rarely detected her, even in looking at us. She had a way of sitting for hours together in the same part of the room, without ever changing her position, without occupation of any kind, without uttering a word, or breathing a sigh. I soon discovered that she was not lost in thought, at these periods (as I had at first supposed); but lost in a strange sort of lethargy of body and mind; a comfortless, waking trance, into which she fell from sheer physical weakness—it was like the vacancy and feebleness of a first con-

valescence, after a long illness. She never changed: never looked better, never worse. I often spoke to her: I tried hard to show my sympathy, and win her confidence and friendship. The poor lady was always thankful, always spoke to me gratefully and kindly, but very briefly. She never told me what were her sufferings, or her sorrows. The story of that lonely, lingering life was an impenetrable mystery for her own family —for her husband and her daughter, as well as for me. It was a secret between her and God.

With Mrs. Sherwin as the guardian to watch over Margaret, it may easily be imagined that I felt none of the heavier oppressions of restraint. Her presence, as the third person appointed to remain with us, was not enough to repress the little endearments to which each evening's lesson gave rise; but was just sufficiently perceptible to

invest them with the character of stolen endearments, and to make them all the more precious on that very account. Mrs. Sherwin never knew, I never thoroughly knew myself till later, how much of the secret of my patience under my year's probation lay in her conduct, while she was sitting in the room with Margaret and me.

In this solitude where I now write—in the change of life and of all life's hopes and enjoyments which has come over me—when I look back to those evenings at North Villa, I shudder as I look. At this moment, I see the room again—as in a dream—with the little round table, the reading lamp, and the open books. Margaret and I are sitting together—close, close together: her hand is in mine; my heart is with her's: Love, and Youth, and Beauty—the mortal Trinity of this world's worship—are there, in that quiet, softly-lit room; but not alone.

Away in the dim light behind, is a solitary figure, ever mournful and ever still. It is a woman's form; but how wasted and how weak!—a woman's face; but how ghastly and rigid, with those eyes that are vacant, those lips that are motionless, those cheeks that the blood never tinges, that the freshness of health and happiness shall never visit again! Woeful, warning figure of dumb sorrow and patient pain, to fill the background of a picture of Love and Beauty and Youth!

But I am straying from my task. Let me return to my narrative: its course begins to darken before me apace, while I now write.

The partial restraint and embarrassment of manner and speech, caused at first by the strange terms on which my wife and I were living together, gradually vanished

before the frequency of my visits to North Villa. We soon began to speak with all the ease, all the unpremeditated frankness of a long intimacy. Margaret's powers of conversation were generally only employed to lead me to exert mine. She was never tired of inducing me to speak of my family. She listened with every appearance of interest, while I talked of my father, my sister, or my elder brother; but, whenever she questioned me directly about any of them, her inquiries invariably led away from their characters and dispositions, to their personal appearance, their every-day habits, their dress, their intercourse with the gay world, the things they spent their money on; and other topics of a similar nature.

For instance: she always listened, and listened attentively, to what I told her of my father's character, and of the principles and prejudices which regulated his life. She

showed every disposition to profit by the instructions I gave her beforehand, about how she should treat his peculiarities when she was introduced to him. (This was a subject I often reverted to ; for, at times, I now felt almost as hopefully as I spoke, in reference to the results of presenting my wife to my father.) But, on all these occasions, what really interested her most, was to hear how many servants waited on him ; how often he went to Court ; how many lords and ladies he knew ; what he said or did to his servants, when they committed mistakes ; whether he was ever angry with his children for asking him for money ; and whether he allowance'd my sister to a certain number of dresses in the course of the year ?

Again : whenever our conversation turned on Clara, if I began by describing her kindness, her gentleness and goodness, her

simple, winning manners—I was sure to be led insensibly into a digression about her height, figure, complexion, and style of dress. The latter subject especially interested Margaret; she could question me on it, over and over again: What was Clara's usual morning dress? How did she wear her hair? What was her evening dress? Did she make a difference between a dinner-party and a ball? What colours did she prefer? What dress-maker did she employ? Did she wear much jewellery? Which did she like best in her hair, and which were most fashionable, flowers or pearls? How many new dresses did she have in a year? and was there more than one maid especially to attend on her?

Then, again: Had she a carriage of her own? What ladies took care of her when she went out? Did she like dancing? What were the fashionable dances at noble-

men's houses? Did young ladies in the great world practise the piano-forte much? How many offers had my sister had? Did she go to Court, as well as my father? What did she talk about to gentlemen, and what did gentlemen talk about to her? If she were speaking to a duke, how often would she say "your Grace" to him? and would a duke get her a chair, or an ice, and wait on her just as ordinary gentlemen waited upon ladies, when they met them in society?

My replies to these, and hundreds of other questions like them, were received by Margaret with the most eager attention. On the favourite subject of Clara's dresses, my answers were an unending source of amusement and pleasure to her. She especially enjoyed overcoming the difficulties of interpreting aright my clumsy, circumlocutory phrases in attempting to describe

shawls, gowns, and bonnets ; and taught me the exact millinery language which I ought to have made use of, with an arch expression of triumph and a burlesque earnestness of manner, that always enchanted me. At that time, every word she uttered, no matter how frivolous, was the sweetest of all music to my ears. It was only by the stern test of after events that I learnt to analyse her conversation. Sometimes, when I was away from her, I might think of leading her girlish curiosity to higher things ; but when we met again, the thought vanished ; and it became delight enough for me simply to hear her speak, without once caring or considering what she spoke of.

Those were the days when I lived happy and unreflecting in the broad sunshine of joy which love showered round me—my eyes were dazzled ; my mind lay asleep

under it. Once or twice, a cloud came threatening, with chill and shadowy influence ; but it passed away, and then the sunshine returned—to *me*, the same sunshine that it was before.

II.

THE first change that passed over the calm uniformity of the life at North Villa, came in this manner :

One evening, on entering the drawing-room, I missed Mrs. Sherwin ; and found to my great disappointment that her husband was apparently settled there for the evening. He looked a little flurried, and was more restless than usual. His first words, as he greeted me, were :

“Only think! Mr. Mannion has come back—at least two days before I expected him!”

At first, I felt inclined to ask who Mr. Mannion was, and what consequence it could possibly be to me that he had come back. But immediately afterwards, I remembered that this Mr. Mannion’s name had been mentioned during my first conversation with Mr. Sherwin; and then I recalled to mind the description I had heard of him, as “confidential clerk;” as forty years of age; and as an educated man, who had made his information of some use to Margaret in keeping up the knowledge she had acquired at school. I knew no more than this about him, and I felt no curiosity to discover more from Mr. Sherwin.

Margaret and I sat down as usual with our books about us. There had been something a little hurried and abrupt in her

manner of receiving me, when I came in. When we began to read, her attention wandered incessantly: she looked round several times towards the door. Mr. Sherwin walked about the room without intermission, except when he once paused on his restless course, to tell me that Mr. Mannion was coming that evening; and that he hoped I should have no objection to be introduced to a person who was "quite like one of the family, and well enough read to be sure to please a great reader like me." I asked myself rather impatiently, who was this Mr. Mannion, that his arrival at his employer's house should make a sensation? When I whispered something of this to Margaret, she smiled rather uneasily, and said nothing.

At last the bell was rung. Margaret started a little at the sound—Mr. Sherwin sat down; composing himself into rather an

elaborate attitude—the door opened, and Mr. Mannion entered.

Mr. Sherwin received his clerk with the assumed superiority of the master in his words; but his tones and manner flatly contradicted them. Margaret rose hastily, and then as hastily sat down again, while the visitor very respectfully took her hand, and made the usual inquiries. After this, he was introduced to me; and then Margaret was sent away to summon her mother down stairs. While she was out of the room, there was nothing to distract my attention from Mr. Mannion. I looked at him with a curiosity and interest, which I could hardly account for at first.

If extraordinary regularity of feature were alone sufficient to make a handsome man, then this confidential clerk of Mr. Sherwin's was assuredly one of the handsomest men I ever beheld. Viewed separately from the

head (which was rather large, both in front and behind) his face exhibited, throughout, an almost perfect symmetry of proportion. His bald forehead was smooth and massive as marble; his high brow and thin eyelid had the firmness and immobility of marble, and seemed as cold; his delicately-formed lips, when he was not speaking, closed habitually, as changelessly still as if no breath of life ever passed them. There was not a wrinkle or line anywhere on his face. But for the baldness in front, and the grey-ness of the hair at the back and sides of his head, it would have been impossible from his appearance to have guessed his age, even within ten years of what it really was.

Such was his countenance in point of form; but in that which is the outward vindication of our immortality—in expression—it was, as I now beheld it, an utter void. Never had I before seen any human



face which baffled all inquiry like his. No mask could have been made expressionless enough to resemble it; and yet it looked like a mask. It told you nothing of his thoughts, when he spoke: nothing of his disposition, when he was silent. His light grey eyes gave you no help in trying to study him. They never varied from the steady, straightforward look, which was exactly the same for Margaret as it was for me; for Mrs. Sherwin as for Mr. Sherwin—exactly the same whether he spoke or whether he listened; whether he talked of indifferent, or of important matters. Who was he? What was he? His name and calling were poor replies to the questions. Was he naturally cold and unimpressible at heart? or had some fierce passion, some terrible sorrow, ravaged the life within him, and left it dead for ever after? Impossible to conjecture! Impos-

sible to decide, from looking at him, whether his temperament was cold or hot ; whether his intellect tended towards observation or reflection ! There was the impenetrable face before you, wholly inexpressive—so inexpressive that it did not even look vacant—a mystery for your eyes, your heart, and your mind to dwell on—hiding something ; but whether vice or virtue you could not tell.

He was dressed as unobtrusively as possible, entirely in black ; and was rather above the middle height. His manner was the only part of him that betrayed anything to the observation of others. Viewed in connection with his station, his demeanour (unobtrusive though it was) proclaimed itself as above his position in the world. He had all the quietness and self-possession of a thorough gentleman. He maintained his respectful bearing, without the slightest appearance of cringing ; and displayed a deci-

sion, both in word and action, that could never be mistaken for obstinacy or over-confidence. Before I had been in his company five minutes, his manner assured me that he must have descended to the position he now occupied.

On his introduction to me, he bowed without saying anything. When he spoke to Mr. Sherwin, his voice was as void of expression as his face: it was rather low in tone; but singularly distinct in utterance. He spoke deliberately; but with no emphasis on particular words, and without hesitation in choosing his terms.

When Mrs. Sherwin came down, I watched her conduct towards him. She could not repress a slight nervous shrinking, when he approached and placed a chair for her. In answering his inquiries after her health, she never once looked at him; but fixed her eyes all the time on Margaret

and me, with a sad, anxious expression, wholly indescribable, which often recurred to my memory after that day. She always looked more or less frightened, poor thing, in her husband's presence ; but she seemed positively chilled and awe-struck before Mr. Mannion.

In truth, my first observation of this so-called clerk, at North Villa, was enough to convince me that he was master there—master in his own quiet, unobtrusive way. That man's character, of whatever elements it might be composed, was a character that ruled. I could not see this in his face, or detect it in his words ; but I could discover it in the looks and manners of his employer and his employer's family, as he now sat at the same table with them. Margaret's eyes avoided his countenance much less frequently than the eyes of her parents ; but then he rarely looked at her in return—rarely looked

at her at all, except when common courtesy obliged him to do so.

If any one had told me, beforehand, that I should suspend my ordinary evening's occupation with my young wife, for the sake of observing the very man who had interrupted it, and that man only Mr. Sherwin's clerk, I should have laughed at the idea. Yet so it was. Our books lay neglected on the table—neglected by me, perhaps by Margaret too, for Mr. Mannion.

His conversation, on this occasion at least, baffled all curiosity as completely as his face. I tried to lead him to talk. He just answered me, and that was all; speaking with great respect of manner and phrase, very intelligibly, but very briefly. Mr. Sherwin, after referring to the business expedition on which he had been absent for the purchase of silks at Lyons, asked him some questions about France and the French, which evidently pro-

eeded from the most ludicrous ignorance both of the country and the people. Mr. Mannion just set him right ; and did no more. There was not the smallest inflection of sarcasm in his voice, not the slightest look of sarcasm in his eye, while he spoke. When we talked among ourselves, he did not join in the conversation ; but sat quietly waiting until he might be pointedly and personally addressed again. At these times, a suspicion crossed my mind that he might be really studying my character, as I was vainly trying to study his ; and I often turned suddenly round on him, to see whether he was looking at me. This was never the case. His hard, chill grey eyes were not on me, and not on Margaret : they rested most frequently on Mrs. Sherwin, who always shrank before them.

After staying little more than half an hour, he rose to go away. While Mr.

Sherwin was vainly pressing him to remain longer, I walked to the round table at the other end of the room, on which the book was placed that Margaret and I had intended to read during the evening. I was standing by the table, when he came to take leave of me. He just glanced at the volume under my hand; and said in tones too low to be heard at the other end of the room:

“I hope my arrival has not interrupted any occupation to-night, Sir. Mr. Sherwin, aware of the interest I must feel in whatever concerns the family of an employer whom I have served for years, has informed me in confidence—a confidence which I know how to respect and preserve—of your marriage with his daughter, and of the peculiar circumstances under which the marriage has been contracted. I may at least venture, Sir, to congratulate the young lady on a change of life which must procure her hap-

piness, having begun already by procuring the increase of her mental resources and pleasures.” He bowed; and pointed to the book on the table.

“I believe, Mr. Mannion,” said I, “that you have been of great assistance in laying a foundation for the studies to which I presume you refer.”

“I endeavoured to make myself useful in that way, Sir, as in all others, when my employer desired it.” He bowed again, as he said this; and then went out, followed by Mr. Sherwin, who held a short colloquy with him in the hall.

What had he said to me? Only a few civil words, spoken in a very respectful manner. There had been nothing in his tones, nothing in his looks, to give any peculiar significance to what he uttered. Perhaps he had spoken with rather more quietness and deliberation than I had heard

him speak with yet—that was all. Still, the moment his back was turned, I found myself speculating whether his words contained any hidden meaning; trying to recall something in his voice or manner which might guide me in discovering the real sense he attached to what he said. It seemed as if the most powerful whet to my curiosity, were supplied by my own experience of the impossibility of reading the man's character by a single sign, either in his face or his conversation!

I questioned Margaret about him. She could not tell me anything more than I knew already. He had always been very kind and useful; he was a clever man, and could talk a great deal sometimes, when he chose; and he had taught her more of foreign languages and foreign literature in a month, than she had learned at school in a year. While she was telling me this, I hardly

noticed that she spoke in a very hurried manner, and busied herself in arranging the books and work that lay on the table. My attention was more closely directed to Mrs. Sherwin. To my surprise, I saw her eagerly lean forward while Margaret was speaking, and fix her eyes on her daughter with a look of penetrating scrutiny, of which I could never have supposed a person usually so feeble and unenergetic to be capable. I thought of transferring to her my questionings on the subject of Mr. Mannion ; but, at that moment, her husband entered the room, and I addressed myself for further enlightenment to him.

“Aha!” — cried Mr. Sherwin, rubbing his hands triumphantly—“I knew Mannion would please you—told you so, my dear Sir ; told you so, if you remember, before he came in. Curious-looking person ; most curious, indeed—isn’t he ?”

“ So curious, that I may safely say I never saw a face in the slightest degree resembling his in my life. Your clerk, Mr. Sherwin, is a complete walking mystery that I want to solve. Margaret cannot give me much help, I am afraid. When you came in, I was about to apply to Mrs. Sherwin for a little assistance.”

“ Don’t do any such thing ! You’ll be quite in the wrong box there. Mrs. S. always sports sulky, whenever Mannion and she are in company together. Considering her behaviour to him, I wonder he can be so civil to her.”

“ Well : but what can you tell me about him yourself, Mr. Sherwin ?”

“ I can tell you there’s not a house of business in London has such a managing man as he is : he’s my factotum—my—my right hand, in short ; and my left too, for the matter of that. He understands my

ways of doing business ; and, in fact, carries things out in first-rate style. Why, he'd be worth his weight in gold, only for the knack he has of keeping the young men in the shop in order. Poor devils ! they don't, know how he does it ; but there's a particular quiet sort of look of Mr. Mannion's that's as bad as transportation and hanging to them, whenever they catch it. I'll pledge you my word of honour he's never had a day's illness, or made a single mistake since he's been with me. He's a quiet, steady-going, regular dragon at his work—he is ! And then, so obliging—so particularly so—in other things. I've only got to say to him : ‘Here's Margaret at home for the holidays ;’ or ‘Here's Margaret a little out of sorts, and going to be nursed at home for the half year — what's to be done about keeping up her lessons ? I can't pay for a governess (bad lot governesses !) and school

too.'—I've only got to say that ; and up gets Mannion from his books and his fireside at home, in the evening—which begins to be something you know to a man of his time of life — and turns tutor for me, gratis ; and a first-rate tutor, too ! That's what I call having a treasure ! And yet, though he's been with us for years, Mrs. S. there, won't take to him !—I defy her, or anybody else, to say why or wherefore !”

“Do you know how he was employed before he came to you ?”

“Ah ! now you've hit it—that's where you're right in saying he's a mystery. What he did before I knew him, is more than I can tell—a good deal more. He came to me with a capital recommendation and security, from a gentleman whom I know to be of the highest respectability. I had a vacancy in the back office, and tried him, and found out what he was worth, in

no time—I flatter myself I've a knack at that with everybody. Well: before I got used to his curious-looking face, and his quiet ways, and so forth, I wanted badly enough to know something about him, and who his connections were. First, I asked his friend who had recommended him — the friend wasn't at liberty to answer for anything but his perfect trustworthiness. Then I asked Mannion himself point-blank about it, one day. He just told me that he had reasons for keeping his family affairs to himself — nothing more — but you know the way he has with him; and—damn it! he put the stopper on me, from that time to this. I wasn't going to risk losing the best clerk that ever man had, by worrying him about his secrets. They didn't interfere with business, and didn't interfere with me: so I put my curiosity in my pocket. I know nothing about him, but that he's my

right-hand man, and the honestest fellow that ever stood in shoes. He may be the Great Mogul himself, in disguise, for anything I care! In short, *you* may be able to find out all about him, my dear Sir; but *I can't*."

"There does not seem much chance for me, Mr. Sherwin, after what you have said."

"Well: I'm not so sure of that—plenty of chances here, you know. You'll see him often enough: he lives near, and drops in constantly of evenings. We settle business matters that won't come into business hours, in my private snugger up stairs. In fact, he's one of the family; treat him as such, and get anything out of him you can—the more the better, as far as regards that. Ah! Mrs. S., you may stare, Ma'am; but I say again, he's one of the family; may be, he'll be my partner some of these

days—you'll have to get used to him then, whether you like it or not."

"One more question: is he married or single?"

"Single, to be sure—a regular old bachelor—no use for the ladies to set their caps at him, I can tell them!"

During the whole time we had been speaking, Mrs. Sherwin had looked at us with far more earnestness and attention than I had ever seen her display before. Even her languid faculties seemed susceptible of active curiosity on the subject of Mr. Mannion—the more so, perhaps, from her very dislike of him. Margaret had moved her chair into the background, while her father was talking; and was apparently little interested in the topic under discussion. In the first interval of silence, she complained of headache, and asked leave to retire to her room.

After she left us, I took my departure ; for Mr. Sherwin evidently had nothing more to tell me about his clerk that was worth hearing. On my way home, Mr. Mannion occupied no small share of my thoughts. The idea of trying to penetrate the mystery connected with him, was an idea that pleased me ; there was a promise of future excitement in it of no ordinary kind. I determined to have a little private conversation with Margaret about him ; and to make her an ally in my new project. If there really had been some romance connected with Mr. Mannion's early life—if that strange and striking face of his was indeed a sealed book which contained a secret story, what a triumph and a pleasure, if Margaret and I should succeed in discovering it together !

When I woke the next morning, I could hardly believe that this tradesman's clerk had so interested my curiosity that he had

actually shared my thoughts with my young wife, during the evening before. And yet, when I next saw him, he produced exactly the same impression on me again.

III.

SOME weeks passed away ; Margaret and I resumed our usual employments and amusements ; the life at North Villa ran on smoothly, monotonously, obscurely as usual —and still I remained as ignorant as ever of Mr. Mannion's history and Mr. Mannion's character. He came frequently to the house, in the evening ; but was generally closeted with Mr. Sherwin, and seldom accepted his employer's constant invitation to him to join

the party in the drawing-room. At those rare intervals when we did see him, his appearance and behaviour were exactly the same as on the night when I had met him for the first time: he spoke just as seldom, and resisted just as resolutely and respectfully the many attempts made on my part to lead him into conversation and familiarity. If he had really been trying to excite my interest, he could not have succeeded more effectually. I felt towards him much as a man feels in a labyrinth, when every fresh failure in gaining the centre only produces fresh obstinacy in recommencing the effort to arrive at it.

From Margaret I gained no sympathy for my newly-aroused curiosity. She appeared, much to my surprise, to care little about Mr. Mannion; and always changed the conversation, if it related to him, whenever it depended upon her to continue the topic or not.

Mrs. Sherwin's conduct was different when I spoke to her on the same subject. She always listened intently to what I said ; but her answers were invariably brief, confused, and sometimes absolutely incomprehensible. It was only after great difficulty that I induced her to confess her dislike of Mr. Mannion. Whence it proceeded she could never tell. Did she suspect anything ? In answering this question, she always stammered, trembled, and looked away from me. " How could she suspect anything ? If she did suspect, it would be very wrong without good reason : but she ought not, and did not, of course."

I never obtained any replies from her more intelligible than these. Attributing their confusion to the nervous agitation which more or less affected her when she spoke on any subject, I soon ceased making any efforts to induce her to explain herself ;

and determined to search for the clue to Mr. Mannion's character, without seeking assistance from any one.

Accident at length gave me an opportunity of knowing something of his habits and opinions ; and so far, therefore, of knowing something about the man himself.

One night, I met him in the hall at North Villa, about to leave the house at the same time that I was, after a business-consultation in private with Mr. Sherwin. We went out together. The sky was unusually black ; the night atmosphere unusually oppressive and still. The roll of distant thunder sounded faint and dreary all about us. The sheet lightning, flashing quick and low in the horizon, made the dark firmament look like a thick veil, rising and falling incessantly, over a heaven of dazzling light behind it. Such few foot passengers as passed us, passed running—for heavy, warning drops were

falling already from the sky. We quickened our pace; but before we had walked more than two hundred yards, the rain came down, furious and drenching, in one instant; and the thunder began to peal fearfully, right over our heads.

“ My house is close by,” said my companion just as quietly and deliberately as usual—“ pray step in, Sir, until the storm is over.”

I followed him down a bye street: he opened a door with his own key; and the next instant I was sheltered under Mr. Mannion’s roof.

He led me at once into a room on the ground floor. The fire was blazing in the grate; an arm-chair, with a reading easel attached, was placed by it; the lamp was ready lit; the tea-things were placed on the table; the dark, thick curtains were drawn close over the window; and, as if to complete

the picture of comfort before me, a large black cat lay on the rug, basking luxuriously in the heat of the fire. While Mr. Mannion went out to give some directions, as he said, to his servant, I had an opportunity of examining the apartment more in detail. To study the appearance of a man's dwelling-room, is very often nearly equivalent to studying his own character.

The personal contrast between Mr. Sherwin and his clerk was remarkable enough, but the contrast between the dimensions and furnishing of the rooms they lived in, was to the full as extraordinary. The apartment I now surveyed was less than half the size of the sitting-room at North Villa. The paper on the walls was of a dark red; the curtains were of the same colour; the carpet was brown, and if it bore any pattern, that pattern was too quiet and unpretending to be visible by candle-light. One wall was

entirely occupied by rows of dark mahogany shelves, completely filled with books, most of them cheap editions of the classical works of ancient and modern literature. The opposite wall was thickly hung with engravings in maple-wood frames from the works of modern painters, English and French. All the minor articles of furniture were of the plainest and neatest order—even the white china tea-pot and tea-cup on the table, had neither pattern nor colouring of any kind. What a contrast was this room to the drawing-room at North Villa !

On re-entering, Mr. Mannion found me looking at his tea-equipage. “I am afraid, Sir, I must confess myself an epicure and a prodigal in two things,” said he, “an epicure in tea, and a prodigal (at least for a person in my situation) in books. However, I receive a liberal salary, and can satisfy my

tastes, such as they are, and save money too. What can I offer you, Sir?"

Seeing the preparations on the table, I asked for tea. While he was speaking to me, there was one peculiarity about him that I observed. Almost all men, when they stand on their own hearths, in their own homes, instinctively alter more or less from their out-of-door manner: the stiffest people expand, the coldest thaw a little, by their own firesides. But it was not so with Mr. Mannion. He was exactly the same man at his own house that he was at Mr. Sherwin's.

There was no need for him to have told me that he was an epicure in tea; the manner in which he made it would have betrayed that to anybody. He put in nearly treble the quantity which would generally be considered sufficient for two persons; and almost immediately after he had filled the

tea-pot with boiling water, began to pour from it into the cups—thus preserving all the aroma and delicacy of flavour in the herb, without the alloy of any of the coarser part of its strength. When we had finished our first cups, there was no pouring of dregs into a basin, or of fresh water on the leaves. A middle-aged female servant, neat and quiet, came up and took away the tray, bringing it to us again with the tea-pot and tea-cups clean and empty, to receive a fresh infusion from fresh leaves. These were trifles to notice; but I thought of other tradesmen's clerks who were drinking their gin-and-water jovially, at home or at a tavern, and found such trifles useful, as marking points of character in this instance.

The conversation between us turned at first on trivial subjects, and was but ill sustained on my part—there were peculiarities in my present position which made me

thoughtful. Once, our talk ceased altogether ; and just at that moment, the storm without began to rise to its height. Hail mingled with the rain, and rattled heavily against the window. The thunder, bursting louder and louder with each successive peal, seemed to shake the house to its foundations. As I listened to the fearful crashing and roaring that seemed to fill the whole measureless void of upper air, and then looked round on the calm, dead-calm face of the man beside me—without one human emotion of any kind even faintly pictured on it, to show that the terrible glory of the night-storm had either a voice for his heart, or a sound for his ear—I felt strange, unutterable sensations creeping over me ; our silence grew oppressive and sinister ; I began to wish, I hardly knew why, for some third person in the room—for somebody else to look at and to speak to.

He was the first to resume the conversation. I should have imagined it impossible for any man, in the midst of such thunder as now raged above our heads, to think or talk of anything but the storm. And yet, when he spoke, it was merely on a subject connected with his introduction to me at North Villa. His attention seemed as far from being attracted or impressed by the mighty elemental tumult without, as if the tranquillity of the night were uninvaded by the slightest murmur of sound.

“ May I inquire, Sir,” said he, “ whether I am right in apprehending that my conduct towards you, since we first met at Mr. Sherwin’s house, may have appeared strange, and even discourteous, in your eyes ?”

“ In what respect, Mr. Mannion ?” said I ; a little startled by the abruptness of the question.

“ I am perfectly sensible, Sir, that you

have kindly set me the example, on many occasions, in trying to better our acquaintance. When such advances are made by one in your station to one in mine, they ought to be immediately and gratefully responded to."

Why did he pause? Was he about to tell me he had discovered that my advances sprang from curiosity to know more about him than he was willing to reveal? I waited for him to proceed.

"I have only failed," he continued—"in the courtesy and gratitude you had a right to expect from me, because, knowing how you were situated with Mr. Sherwin's daughter, I thought any intrusion on my part, while you were with the young lady, might not be so acceptable, as you, Sir, in your kindness were willing to lead me to believe."

"Let me assure you," I answered; re-

lieved to find myself unsuspected, and really impressed by his delicacy—"let me assure you that I fully appreciate the consideration you have shown—"

Just as the last words passed my lips, the thunder pealed awfully over the house. I said no more: the sound silenced me.

"As my explanation has satisfied you, Sir," said he; his clear and deliberate utterance rising discordantly audible above the long, retiring roll of the last burst of thunder—"may I feel justified in speaking on the subject of your present position in my employer's house, with some freedom? I mean, if I may say so without offence, with the freedom of a friend."

I begged he would use all the freedom he wished, and felt really desirous that he should do so, apart from any purpose of leading him to talk unreservedly on the chance of hearing him talk of himself.

The profound respect of manner and phrase which he had hitherto testified — observed by a man of his age, to a man of mine — made me feel ill at ease. He was most probably my equal in acquirements ; he had the manners and tastes of a gentleman, and might have the birth too, for aught I knew to the contrary. The difference between us was only in our worldly positions. I had not enough of my father's pride of caste to think that this difference alone, made it right that a man whose years nearly doubled mine, whose knowledge, perhaps surpassed mine, should speak to me as Mr. Mannion had spoken up to this time.

“I may tell you then,” he resumed, “that while I am anxious to commit no untimely intrusion on your hours at North Villa, I am at the same time desirous of being something more than merely inof-

fensive towards you. I should wish to be positively useful, as far as I can. In my opinion, Mr. Sherwin has held you to rather a hard engagement—he is trying your discretion and resolution a little too severely I think, at your years and in your situation. Feeling thus, it is my sincere wish to render what connection and influence I have with the family, useful in making the probation you have still to pass through, as easy as possible. I have more means of doing this, Sir, than you might at first imagine."

His offer took me a little by surprise. I felt with a sort of shame, that candour and warmth of feeling were what I had not expected from him. My attention insensibly wandered away from the storm without, to attach itself more and more closely to him, as he went on:

"I am perfectly sensible that such a

proposition as I now make to you, proceeding from one little better than a stranger, may cause surprise and even suspicion, at first. I can only explain it, by asking you to remember that I have known the young lady since childhood ; and that, having assisted in forming her mind and developing her character, I feel towards her almost as a second father, and am therefore naturally interested in the gentleman who has chosen her for a wife.”

Was there a tremor at last in that changeless voice, as he spoke ? I thought so ; and looked anxiously to catch the answering gleam of expression, which might now, for the first time, be softening his iron features, animating the blank stillness of his countenance. If any such expression had been visible, I was too late to detect it. Just as I looked at him, he stooped down to poke the fire. When he turned towards

me again, his face was the same impenetrable face, his eye the same hard, steady, inexpressive eye as before.

“Besides,” he continued, “a man must have some object in life for his sympathies to be employed on. I have neither wife nor child; and no near relations to think of—I have nothing but my routine of business in the day, and my books here by my lonely fireside, at night. Our life is not much; but it was made for a little more than this. My former pupil at North Villa, is my pupil no longer—I can’t help feeling that it would be an object in existence for me to occupy myself with her happiness and yours; to have two young people, in the heyday of youth and first love, looking towards me occasionally for the promotion of some of their pleasures—no matter how trifling. All this will seem odd and incomprehensible to *you*: if you

were of my age, Sir, and in my position, you would understand it."

Was it possible that he could speak thus, without his voice faltering, or his eye softening in the slightest degree? Yes: I looked at him and listened to him intently; but there was not the faintest change in his face or his tones—there was nothing to show outwardly whether he felt what he said, or whether he did not. His words had painted such a picture of forlornness on my mind, that I had mechanically half raised my hand to take his, while he was addressing me; but the sight of him when he ceased, checked the impulse almost as soon as it was formed. He did not appear to have noticed either my involuntary gesture, or its immediate repression; and went on speaking:

"I have said perhaps more than I ought," he resumed. "However, if, as is

most likely, I have not succeeded in making you understand my explanation as I could wish, we will change the subject, and not resume it again, until you have known me for a much longer time."

"On no account change the subject, Mr. Mannion," said I; unwilling to let it be implied that I would not put trust in him. "I am deeply sensible of the kindness of your offer, and the interest you take in Margaret and me. We shall both, I am sure, accept your good offices—"

I stopped. The storm had decreased a little in violence; but my attention was now struck by the wind, which had risen, as the thunder and rain had partially lulled. Oh, how drearily it was moaning down the street! It seemed at that moment, to be wailing over *me*; to be wailing over *him*; to be wailing over all mortal things! The strange sensations I then felt, moved me

to listen to it in silence; but I checked them, and spoke again.

“If I have not answered you as I should,” I continued, “you must attribute it partly to the storm, which I confess rather discomposes my ideas; and partly to a little surprise—a very foolish surprise, I own—that you should still be able to feel so strong a sympathy with interests which are generally only considered of importance to the young.”

“The age of the body is oftener the renewing of the youth of the heart, than the young in years suppose,” said he. “You may be surprised to hear a tradesman’s clerk talk thus; but I was not always what I am now. I have gathered knowledge, and suffered in the gathering. I have grown old before my time—my forty years are like the fifty of other men.”—(My heart beat quicker—was he, unasked, about to

disclose the mystery which evidently hung over his early life? No: he dropped the subject at once, when he continued. I longed to ask him to resume it, but could not. I feared the same repulse which Mr. Sherwin had received; and remained silent).

“What I was,” he proceeded, “is not the point: it is what I can do for you. Any aid I can give, may be poor enough; but it may be of some use notwithstanding. For instance, the other day, if I mistake not, you were a little hurt at Mr. Sherwin’s taking his daughter to a party, to which the family had been invited. This was very natural. You could not be there to watch over her in your real character, without disclosing a secret which must be kept safe; and you knew not what young men she might meet, who would imagine her to be Miss Sherwin still, and would

regulate their conduct accordingly. Now, I think I might be of use here. I have some influence—perhaps in strict truth I ought to say great influence—with my employer; and, if you wished it, I would use that influence to back your's, in inducing him to forego, for the future, any intention of taking his daughter into society, except when you desire it. Again: I think I am not wrong in assuming that you infinitely prefer the company of Mrs. Sherwin to that of Mr. Sherwin, during your interviews with the young lady?"

How had he found that out? At any rate, he was right; and I told him so candidly.

"The preference is on many accounts a very natural one," said he; "but if you suffered it to appear to Mr. Sherwin, it might, for obvious reasons, produce a most unfavourable effect. I might interfere in the

matter, however, without suspicion ; I should have many opportunities of keeping him away from the room, in the evening, which I could use, if you wished it. And, more than that, if you wanted longer and more frequent communication with North Villa than you now enjoy, I might be able to effect this also. I do not mention what I could do in these, and in other matters, in any disparagement, Sir, of the influence which you have with Mr. Sherwin, in your own right ; but, because I know that in what concerns your intercourse with his daughter, my employer *has* asked, and *will* ask my advice, from the habit of doing so in other things. I have hitherto declined giving him this advice in your affairs ; but I will give it, and in your favour and the young lady's, if you and she choose."

I thanked him—but not in such warm terms as I should have employed, if I had

seen even the faintest smile on his face, or had heard any change in his steady, deliberate tones, as he spoke. While his words attracted, his immovable looks repelled me, in spite of myself.

“I must again beg you”—he proceeded—“to remember what I have already said, in your estimate of the motives of my offer. If, after that, I still appear to be interfering officiously in your affairs, you have only to think that I have presumed impertinently on the freedom you have allowed me, and to treat me no longer on the terms of to-night. I shall not complain of your conduct, and shall try hard not to consider you unjust to me, if you do.”

Such an appeal as this was not to be resisted: I answered him at once and unreservedly. What right had I to draw bad inferences from a man’s face, voice, and manner, merely because they impressed me,

as out of the common? Did I know how much share the influence of natural infirmities, or the outward traces of unknown sorrow and suffering, might have had in producing the external peculiarities which had struck me? He would have every right to upbraid me as unjust—and that in the strongest terms—unless I spoke out fairly in reply.

“I am quite incapable, Mr. Mannion,” said I, “of viewing your offer with any other than grateful feelings. You will find I shall prove this by employing your good offices for Margaret and myself in perfect faith, and sooner perhaps than you may imagine.”

He bowed and said a few cordial words, which I heard but imperfectly—for, as I addressed him, a blast of wind fiercer than usual rushed down the street, shaking the window and shutter violently as it passed, and dying away in a low, melancholy, dirging

swell, like a spirit-cry of lamentation and despair.

When he spoke again, after a momentary silence, it was to make some change in the conversation. He talked of Margaret—dwelling in terms of high praise rather on her moral than on her personal qualities—of Mr. Sherwin, referring to solid and attractive points in his character which I had not detected. What he said of Mrs. Sherwin appeared to be equally dictated by compassion and respect—he even hinted at her coolness towards himself, considerably attributing it to the involuntary caprice of settled nervousness and ill-health. His language, in touching on these subjects, was just as unaffected, just as devoid of any peculiarities, as I had hitherto found it when occupied by other topics.

It was getting late. The thunder still rumbled at long intervals, with a dull

distant sound; and the wind showed no symptoms of subsiding. But the pattering of the rain against the window ceased to be audible. There was little excuse for staying longer; and I wished to find none. I had acquired quite knowledge enough of Mr. Mannion to assure me, that any attempt on my part at extracting from him, in spite of his reserve, the secrets which might be connected with his early life, would prove perfectly fruitless. If I must judge him at all, I must judge him by the experience of the present, and not by the history of the past. I had heard good, and good only, of him from the shrewd master who knew him best, and had tried him longest: he had shown the greatest delicacy towards my feelings, and the strongest desire to do me service—it would be a poor return for both, to let a foolish curiosity tempt me to pry into his private affairs.

I rose to go. He made no effort to detain me; but, after unbarring the shutter and looking out of the window, simply remarked that the rain had almost entirely ceased, and that my umbrella would be quite sufficient protection against all that remained. He followed me into the passage to light me out. As I turned round upon his door-step to thank him for his hospitality, and to bid him good night, the thought came across me, that my manner must have appeared cold and repelling to him—especially when he was offering his services to my acceptance. If I had really produced this impression, he was my inferior in station, and it would be cruel to leave it. I tried to set myself right at parting.

“Let me assure you again,” said I, “that it will not be my fault if Margaret and I do not thankfully employ your good offices, as the good offices of a well-wisher and a friend.”

The lightning was still in the sky, though it only appeared at long intervals. Strangely enough, at the moment when I addressed him, a flash came, and seemed to pass right over his face. It gave such a hideously livid hue, such a spectral look of ghastliness and distortion to his features, that he absolutely seemed to be glaring and grinning on me like a fiend, in the one instant of its duration. For the moment, it required all my knowledge of the settled calmness of his countenance, to convince me that my eyes must have been only dazzled by an optical illusion produced by the lightning.

When the darkness had come again, I bade him good night—first mechanically repeating what I had just said, almost in the same words.

I walked home thoughtful. That night had given me much matter to think of.

IV.

ABOUT the time of my introduction to Mr. Mannion—or, to speak more correctly, both before and after that period—certain peculiarities in Margaret's character and conduct, which came to my knowledge by pure accident, gave me a little uneasiness and even a little displeasure. Neither of these feelings lasted very long, it is true; for the incidents which gave rise to them were of a trifling nature in themselves. While I now write,

however, these domestic occurrences are all vividly present to my recollection. I will mention two of them as instances. Subsequent events, yet to be related, will show that they are not out of place at this part of my narrative.

One lovely autumn morning I called rather before the appointed time, at North Villa. As the servant opened the front garden-gate, the idea occurred to me of giving Margaret a surprise, by entering the drawing-room unexpectedly, with a nosegay gathered for her from her own flower-bed. Telling the servant not to announce me, I went round to the back garden, by a gate which opened into it at the side of the house. The progress of my flower-gathering led me on to the lawn under one of the drawing-room windows, which was left a little open. The voices of my wife and her mother reached me from the room. It was this

part of their dialogue which I unintentionally overheard :—

“ I tell you, mamma, I must and will have the dress, whether papa chooses or not.”

This was spoken loudly and resolutely ; in such tones as I had never heard from Margaret before.

“ Pray—pray, my dear, don’t talk so,” answered the weak, faltering voice of Mrs. Sherwin ; “ you know you have had more than your year’s allowance of dresses already.”

“ But I oughtn’t to be allowanceed like that —*his* sister isn’t allowanceed : why should I be ?”

“ My dear love, surely there’s some difference—”

“ I’m sure there isn’t, now I’m his wife. I shall ride some day in my carriage, just as *his* sister does. *He* gives me my way in everything ; and so ought you !”

“It isn’t *me*, Margaret: if I could do anything, I’m sure I would; but I really couldn’t ask your papa for another new dress, after his having given you so many this year, already.”

“That’s the way it always is with you, mamma—you can’t do this, and you can’t do that—you are so excessively tiresome! But I will have the dress, I’m determined. He says his sister wears light blue crape of an evening; and I’ll have light blue crape too—see if I don’t! I’ll get it somehow from the shop, myself. Papa never takes any notice, I’m sure, what I have on; and he needn’t find out anything about what’s gone out of the shop, until they ‘take stock,’ or whatever it is he calls it. And then, if he flies into one of his passions—”

“My dear! my dear! you really ought not to talk so of your papa—it’s very wrong,

Margaret, indeed—what would Mr. Basil say if he heard you?"

I determined to go in at once, and tell Margaret that I had heard her—resolving, at the same time, to exert some firmness, and remonstrate with her, for her own good, on much of what she had said, which had really surprised and displeased me. On my unexpected entrance, Mrs. Sherwin started, and looked more timid than ever. Margaret, however, came forward to meet me with her wonted smile, and held out her hand with her wonted grace. I said nothing until we had got into our accustomed corner, and were talking together in whispers as usual. Then I began my remonstrance—**very tenderly**, and in the lowest possible tones. She took precisely the right way to stop me in full career, in spite of all my resolution. Her beautiful eyes filled with tears directly—the first I had ever seen in

them: caused, too, by what I had said!— and she murmured a few plaintive words about the cruelty of being angry with her for only wanting to please me by being dressed as my sister was, which upset every intention I had formed but the moment before. I involuntarily devoted myself to soothing and making excuses, for the rest of the morning. Need I say how the matter ended? I never mentioned the subject more; and I made her a present of the new dress.

Some weeks after the little home-breeze, which I have just related, had died away into a perfect calm, I was accidentally witness of another domestic dilemma in which Margaret bore a principal share. On this occasion, as I walked up to the house (in the morning again), I found the front door open. A pail was on the steps — the servant had evidently been washing them, had been in-

terrupted in her work, and had forgotten to close the door when she left it. The nature of the interruption I soon discovered as I entered the hall.

“For God’s sake, Miss!” cried the house-maid’s voice, from the dining-room, “for God’s sake, put down the poker! Missus will be here directly; and it’s *her* cat! Oh, Lord, Miss! you couldn’t go for to do it!—I’m sure you couldn’t!”

“I *will* do it! I’ll kill that infamous, horrid, brutal cat! I don’t care whose it is! —my poor dear, dear, dear bird!” The voice was Margaret’s. At first, its tones were tones of fury: they were afterwards broken by hysterical sobs.

“Poor thing,” continued the servant, soothingly, “I’m sorry for it, and for you too, Miss! But, oh! do please to remember it was you left the cage on the table, in the cat’s reach—”

“ Hold your tongue, you wretch ! How dare you hold me ?—let me go !”

“ Oh, no, no ! you mustn’t—you mustn’t, indeed ! It’s missus’s cat, recollect—missus’s—poor missus’s, who’s always ill, and hasn’t got nothing else to amuse her !”

“ I don’t care ! The cat’s killed my bird, and the cat shall be killed for doing it !—it shall !—it shall !!—it shall !!! I’ll call in the first boy from the street to catch it, and poison it, and hang it ! Let me go ! I *will* go !”

“ I’ll let the cat go first, Miss, as sure as my name’s Susan !”

The next instant, the door was suddenly opened, and puss sprang past me, out of harm’s way, closely followed by the servant, who stared breathless and aghast at seeing me in the hall. I went into the dining-room immediately.

On the floor lay a bird-cage, with the

poor canary dead inside (it was the same canary that I had seen my wife playing with, on the evening of the day when I first met her) — the bird's head had been nearly dragged through the bent wires of the cage, by the murderous claws of the cat. Near the fire-place, with the poker she had just dropped, on the floor by her side, stood Margaret. Never had I seen her look so gloriously beautiful as she now appeared, in the fury of passion which possessed her. Her large black eyes were dilated, and flashing grandly through her tears—the blood was glowing crimson in her cheeks—her lips were parted as she gasped for breath. One of her hands was clenched, and rested on the mantel-piece: the other was pressed tight over her bosom, with the fingers convulsively clasping her dress. Shocked and grieved as I was at the paroxysm of passion into which she had

allowed herself to be betrayed, I could not repress an involuntary feeling of admiration when my eyes first rested on her. Even anger itself looked lovely in that lovely face !

For a moment or two she did not move when she saw me. Then, as I approached her, she dropped down on her knees by the cage, sobbing with frightful violence, and pouring forth a perfect torrent of ejaculations of vengeance against the cat. Mrs. Sherwin came down ; and by her total want of tact and presence of mind, made matters worse. In brief, the scene ended by a fit of hysterics.

To speak to Margaret on that day, as I wished to speak to her, was impossible. To approach the subject of the canary's death afterwards, was useless. If I only hinted in the gentlest way, and with the strongest sympathy for the loss of the bird, at the distress and astonishment she had

caused me by the extremities to which she had allowed her passion to hurry her, a burst of tears was sure to be her only reply —just the reply, of all others, which was best calculated to silence me. If I had been her husband in fact, as well as in name ; if I had been her father, her brother, or her friend, I should have let her first emotions have their way, and then have expostulated with her afterwards. But I was her lover still ; and, to my eyes, Margaret's tears made virtues even of Margaret's faults.

Such occurrences as these, happening but at rare intervals, formed the only interruptions to the generally even and happy tenour of our intercourse. Weeks and weeks glided away ; and not a hasty or a hard word passed between us. Neither, after one preliminary difference had been adjusted, did any subsequent disagreement take place

between Mr. Sherwin and me. This last element in the domestic tranquillity of North Villa was, however, less attributable to his forbearance, or to mine, than to the private interference of Mr. Mannion.

For some days after my interview with the managing clerk, at his own house, I had abstained from calling his offered services into requisition. I was not conscious of any reason for this course of conduct. All that had been said, all that had happened during the night of the storm, had produced a powerful, though vague, impression on me. Strange as it may appear, I could not determine whether my brief but extraordinary experience of my new friend, had attracted me towards him, or repelled me from him. I felt an unwillingness to lay myself under an obligation to him, which was not the result of pride, or false delicacy, or sullenness, or suspicion—it was an inexplicable unwilling-

ness, that sprang from the fear of encountering some heavy responsibility ; but of what nature I could not imagine. I delayed and held back, by instinct ; and, on his side, Mr. Mannion made no further advances. He maintained the same manner, and continued the same habits, during his intercourse with the family at North Villa, which I had observed as characterising him before I took shelter from the storm, in his house. He never referred again to the conversation of that evening, when we now met.

Margaret's behaviour, when I mentioned to her Mr. Mannion's willingness to be useful to us both, rather increased than diminished the vague uncertainties, which perplexed me, on the subject of accepting or rejecting his overtures. I could not induce her to show the smallest interest about him. Neither his house, his personal appearance, his peculiar habits, or his secrecy in relation to

his early life—nothing in short, connected with him—appeared to excite her attention or curiosity in the slightest degree. On the evening of his return from the continent, she had certainly shown some symptoms of interest in his arrival at North Villa, and some appearance of attention to him, when he joined our party. Now, she seemed completely and incomprehensibly changed on this point. Her manner became almost petulant, if I persisted long in making Mr. Mannion a topic of conversation—it was as if she resented his sharing my thoughts in the slightest degree with her. As to the difficult question whether we should engage him in our interests or not, that was a matter which she always seemed to think too trifling to be worth giving an opinion on.

Ere long, however, circumstances decided me as to the course I should take with Mr. Mannion. A ball was given by one of Mr.

Sherwin's rich commercial friends, to which he announced his intention of taking Margaret. Besides the jealousy which I felt—naturally enough, in my peculiar situation—at the idea of my wife going out as Miss Sherwin, and dancing in the character of a young unmarried lady with any young gentlemen who were introduced to her. I had also the strongest possible desire to keep Margaret out of the society of her own class, until my year's probation was over, and I could hope to instal her permanently in the society of *my* class. I had privately mentioned to her my ideas on this subject, and found that she fully agreed with them. She was not wanting in ambition to ascend to the highest degree in the social scale; and had already begun to look with indifference on the society which was offered to her by those in her own rank.

To Mr. Sherwin I could confide nothing

of this. I could only object, generally, to his taking Margaret out, when neither she nor I desired it. He declared that she liked parties—that all girls did—that she only pretended to dislike them, to please me—and that he had made no engagement to keep her moping at home a whole year, on my account. In the case of the particular ball now under discussion, he was determined to have his own way; and he bluntly told me as much.

Irritated by his obstinacy and gross want of consideration for my feelings and my defenceless position, I forgot all doubts and scruples; and privately applied to Mr. Mannion to exert the influence which he had promised to use, if I wished it, in my behalf.

The result was as immediate as it was conclusive. The very next evening, Mr. Sherwin came to us with a note which he

had just written, and informed me that it was an excuse for Margaret's non-appearance at the ball. He never mentioned Mr. Mannion's name; but sulkily and shortly said, that he had re-considered the matter, and had altered his first decision for reasons of his own.

Having once taken a first step in the new direction, I soon followed it up, without hesitation, by taking many others. Whenever I wished to call oftener than once a day at North Villa, I had but to tell Mr. Mannion; and the next morning I found the permission immediately accorded to me by the ruling power. The same secret machinery enabled me to regulate Mr. Sherwin's incomings and outgoings, just as I chose, when Margaret and I were together in the evening. I could feel almost certain, now, of never having any one with us, but Mrs. Sherwin, unless I desired it—which, as may be easily imagined, was seldom enough.

My new ally's ready interference for my advantage was exerted quietly, easily, and as a matter of course. I never knew how, or when, he influenced his employer; and Mr. Sherwin, on his part, never breathed a word of that influence to me. He accorded any extra privilege I might demand, as if he acted entirely under his own will; little suspecting how well I knew what was the real motive power which directed him.

I was the more easily reconciled to employing the services of Mr. Mannion, by the great delicacy with which he performed them. He did not allow me to think—he did not appear to think himself—that he was obliging me in the smallest degree. He affected no sudden intimacy with me; his manners never altered; he still persisted in not joining us in the evening, but at my express invitation; and if I referred in any way to the advantages I derived from his

devotion to my interests and convenience, he always replied in his brief, quiet, manly way, that he considered himself the favoured person, in being permitted to make his services of some use to those in whose welfare he was naturally and really interested.

I had told Mr. Mannion, when I was leaving him on the night of the storm, that I would treat his offers as the offers of a friend ; and I had now made good my words, much sooner and much more unreservedly than perhaps I ever intended, when we parted at his own house-door !

V.

THE autumn was now over; the winter—a raw, cold, gloomy winter—had fairly come; five months had nearly elapsed since Clara and my father had departed for the country: what communication did I hold with them, during that interval?

No personal communication with either—written communication only with my sister. Clara's letters to me were frequent. They studiously avoided anything

like a reproach for my long absence ; and were confined almost exclusively to such details of country life as the writer thought likely to interest me. Their tone was as affectionate—nay, more affectionate, if possible—than usual ; but Clara's gaiety and quiet humour, as a correspondent, were gone. It was easy to see, that she often made an effort to resume the wonted spirit and cheerfulness which had hitherto always given a peculiar charm to her letters—but the effort was too apparent and too ill-sustained, ever to produce a successful result. My conscience taught me only too easily and too plainly how to account for this change —my conscience told me who had altered the tone of Clara's letters, by altering all the favourite purposes and favourite pleasures of her country life — my conscience counselled me to remember that my sister was waiting and longing for me, week after week

and month after month, and still waiting
and longing in vain !

I was selfishly enough devoted to my own passions, my own interest, and my own convenience, at this period of my life ; but I was not so totally dead to every one of the influences which had guided and sustained me since childhood, as to lose all thought of Clara, and my father, and the ancient house that was associated with all my purest and happiest recollections. Sometimes, even in Margaret's beloved presence, a passage from one of my sister's letters would recur to me, exerting over my heart something of the same ascendancy which it would have possessed in byegone days. Sometimes, a thought of Clara put away from me all other thoughts ; and, sometimes, in the lonely London house, I dreamed strangely of country rides with my sister, and of quiet conversations in

the old gothic library at the Hall, just as if my new love, my marriage and all its hopes and fears, were events that had never taken place, interests that had never moved me, but in my own imagination, or in some other dream of some previous night.

Under such influences as these, I twice resolved to make amends for my long absence, by joining my father and my sister in the country, even though it were only for a few days — and, each time, I failed in my resolution. On the second occasion, I had actually mustered firmness enough to get as far as the railway station; and, only at the last moment, faltered and hung back. The struggle that it cost me to part for any length of time from Margaret, I had overcome; but the apprehension, as vivid as it was vague, that something—I knew not what — might happen to her in my absence, turned my steps backward at

starting. I felt heartily ashamed of my own weakness; but I yielded to it nevertheless.

At last, a letter arrived from Clara, containing a summons to the country, which I could not disobey.

“ I have never asked you,” she wrote, “ to come and see us for my sake; for I would not interfere with any of your interests, or any of your plans: but I now ask you to come here for your own sake—just for one week, and no more, unless you like it. You remember papa telling you, in your room in London, that he believed you kept some secret from him. I am afraid this is preying on his mind: your long absence is making him uneasy about you. He does not say so; but he never sends any message, when I write; and if I speak about you, he always changes the subject directly. Pray come here, and show your-

self for a few days — no questions will be asked, you may be sure. It will do so much good; and will prevent—what I hope and pray may never happen—a serious estrangement between papa and you. Recollect, dear Basil, in a month or six weeks we shall come back to town; and then the opportunity will be gone."

As I read these lines I determined to start for the country at once, while the effect of them was still fresh on my mind. Margaret, when I took leave of her, only said that she should like to be going with me—"it would be such a sight for her, to see such a grand country house as ours!" Mr. Sherwin laughed as coarsely as usual, at all the difficulties I made about only leaving his daughter for a week—Mrs. Sherwin very earnestly, and very unaccountably as I then thought, recommended me not to be away any longer than I had proposed—Mr. Man-

nion privately assured me, that I might depend on him in my absence from North Villa, exactly as I had always depended on him, during my presence there. It was strange that *his* parting words should be the only words which soothed and satisfied me on taking leave of London.

The winter afternoon was growing dim already with the evening darkness, as I drove up to the Hall. Snow on the ground, in the country, has always a cheerful look to me. I could have wished to see it on the day of my arrival at home; but there had been a thaw for the last week—mud and water were all about me—a drizzling rain was falling—a raw, damp wind was blowing—a fog was rising, as the evening stole on—and the ancient leafless elms in the park avenue, groaned and creaked above my head drearily, as I approached the house.

My father received me with more cere-

mony than I liked. I had known from a boy, what it meant when he chose to be only polite to his own son. What construction he had put on my long absence and my persistence in keeping my secret from him, I could not tell; but it was evident that I had lost my usual place in his estimation; and lost it past regaining merely by a week's visit. The estrangement between us which my sister had feared, had begun already.

I had been chilled by the desolate aspect of nature, as I approached the Hall; my father's reception of me, when I entered the house increased the comfortless and melancholy impressions produced on my mind: it required all the affectionate warmth of Clara's welcome, all the pleasure of hearing her whisper her thanks, as she kissed me, for my readiness in following her advice, to restore my equanimity. But even then,

when the first hurry and excitement of meeting had passed away, in spite of her kind words and looks, there was something in her face which depressed me. She seemed thinner, and her constitutional pallor was more marked than usual. Cares and anxieties had evidently oppressed her—was I the cause of them ?

The dinner that evening proceeded very heavily and gloomily. My father only talked on general and common-place topics, as if a mere acquaintance had been present. When my sister left us, he too quitted the room, to see some one who had arrived on business. I had no heart for the company of the wine bottles, so I followed Clara.

At first, we only spoke of her occupations since she had been in the country ; I was unwilling, and she forebore, to touch on my long stay in London, or on my father's evident displeasure at my protracted absence.

There was a little restraint between us, which neither had the courage to break through. Before long, however, an accident, trifling enough in itself, obliged me to be more candid ; and enabled her to speak unre- servedly on the subject nearest to her heart.

I was seated opposite to Clara, at the fire-place, and was playing with a favourite dog which had followed me into the room. While I was stooping towards the animal, a locket containing some of Margaret's hair, fell out of its place in my waistcoat, and swung towards my sister by the string which attached it round my neck. I instantly hid it again ; but not before Clara, with a woman's quickness, had detected the trinket as something new, and drawn the right inference, as to the use to which I devoted it.

An expression of surprise and pleasure passed over her face ; she rose, and putting her hands on my shoulders, as if to keep me

still in the place I occupied, looked at me intently.

“Basil! Basil!” said she, “if *that* is all the secret you have been keeping from us, how glad I am! When I see a new locket drop out of my brother’s waistcoat—” she continued, observing that I was too confused to speak—“and find him colouring very deeply, as he hides it again in a great hurry, I should be no true woman if I did not make my own discoveries, and begin to talk about them directly.”

She paused again: I made an effort—a very poor one—to laugh the thing off. Her expression grew serious and thoughtful, while she still fixed her eyes on me. She took my hand gently, whispered in my ear: “When you are married, Basil, I shall love my new sister almost as much as I love you—” and then returned to her place.

At that moment the servant came in with

tea. The interruption gave me a minute or two for consideration. Should I tell her all? Impulse answered, yes—reflection, no. If I disclosed my real situation, I knew I must introduce Clara to Margaret. This would necessitate taking her privately to Mr. Sherwin's house, and exposing to her the humiliating terms of dependence and prohibition on which I lived with my own wife. A strange medley of feelings, in which pride was uppermost, forebade me to do that. Then, again, to involve my sister in my secret, would be to involve her with me in any consequences which might be produced by its disclosure to my father. The mere idea of making her a partaker in responsibilities which I only ought to bear, was not to be entertained for a moment. As soon as we were left alone again, I said to her:

“Will you not think the worse, of me, Clara, if I leave you to draw your own

conclusions from what you have seen?—only asking you to keep strict silence on the subject to every one. I can't speak yet, love, as I wish to speak: you will know why, some day, and say that my reserve was right. In the meantime, can you be satisfied with the assurance, that when the time comes for making my secret known, you shall be the first to know it—the first I put trust in?"

"As you have not starved my curiosity altogether," said Clara, smiling; "but have given it a little hope to feed on for the present, I think, woman though I am, I can promise all you wish. Seriously, Basil," she continued, "that tell-tale locket of yours has already so pleasantly brightened up some very gloomy thoughts of mine about you, that I can now live happily on expectation, without once mentioning your secret again, till you give me leave to do so."

Here, my father entered the room, and

we said no more. His manner towards me had not altered since dinner ; and it remained the same during the week of my stay at the Hall. One morning, when we were alone, I took courage, and determined to try the dangerous ground a little, with a view towards my guidance for the future ; but I had no sooner began by some reference to my stay in London, and some apology for it, than he stopped me at once.

“ I told you,” said he, gravely and coldly —“ I told you some months ago, that I had too much faith in your honour to have any suspicions, or any wish to intrude on affairs which you choose to keep private. Until you have perfect confidence in me, and can speak with complete candour, I will hear nothing. You have not that confidence now—you speak hesitatingly—your eyes do not meet mine fairly and boldly. I tell you again, I will hear nothing

which begins with such common-place excuses as you are making use of. Excuses lead to prevarications, and prevarications to —what I will not insult you by imagining possible in *your* case. You are of age, and must know your own responsibilities and mine. Choose at once, Sir, between saying nothing and saying all."

He waited a moment after he had spoken, and then quitted the room. If he could only have known how I suffered, at that instant, under the base necessities of concealment, I might have confessed everything ; and he must have pitied, though he might not have forgiven me.

This was my first and last attempt at venturing towards the revelation of my secret to my father, by hints and half-admissions. As to boldly confessing it, I persuaded myself into a sophistical conviction that such a course could do no good,

but might do much harm. When the wedded happiness I had already waited for and was to wait for still, through so many months, came at last, was it not best to enjoy my married life in convenient secrecy, as long as I could?—best, to abstain from disclosing my secret to my father, until necessity absolutely obliged, or circumstances absolutely invited me to do so? My inclinations conveniently decided the question in the affirmative; and a decision of any kind, right or wrong, was enough to tranquillize me at that time.

As far as my father was concerned, my journey to the country did no good. I might have returned to London the day after my arrival at the Hall, without altering his opinion of me—but I stayed the whole week nevertheless, for Clara's sake.

In spite of the pleasure afforded by my sister's society, my visit was a painful one.

The selfish longing to be back with Margaret, which I could not wholly repress; my father's coldness; and the winter gloom and rain which confined us almost incessantly within doors, all tended in their different degrees to prevent my living at ease in the Hall. But besides these causes of embarrassment, I had the additional mortification of feeling, for the first time, as a stranger in my own home.

Nothing in the house looked to me what it used to look in former years. The rooms, the old servants, the walks and views, the domestic animals, all appeared to have altered, or to have lost something, since I had seen them last. Particular rooms that I had once been fond of occupying, were favourites no longer: particular habits that I had hitherto always practised in the country, I could only succeed in resuming by an effort which

vexed and fretted me. It was as if my life had run into a new channel, since my last autumn and winter at the Hall, and was now refusing to flow back at my bidding into its old course. Home seemed home no longer, except in name.

As soon as the week was over, my father and I parted exactly as we had met. When I took leave of Clara, she refrained from making any allusion to the shortness of my stay; and merely said that we should soon meet again in London. She evidently saw that my visit had weighed a little on my spirits, and was determined to give to our short farewell as happy and hopeful a character as possible. We now thoroughly understood each other; and that was some consolation on leaving her.

Immediately on my return to London I repaired to North Villa. Nothing, I was told had happened in my absence;

but I remarked some change in Margaret. She looked pale and nervous, and was more silent than I had ever known her to be before, when we met. She accounted for this, in answer to my enquiries, by saying that confinement to the house, in consequence of the raw, wintry weather, had a little affected her; and then changed the subject. In other directions, household aspects had not deviated from their accustomed monotony: as usual, Mrs. Sherwin was at her post in the drawing-room; and her husband was reading the evening paper, over his renowned old port in the dining-room. After the first five minutes of my arrival, I adapted myself again to my old way of life at Mr. Sherwin's, as easily as if I had never interrupted it for a single day. Henceforth, wherever my young wife was, there, and there only, would it be home for *me*! .

Late in the evening, Mr. Mannion arrived with some business letters for Mr. Sherwin's inspection. I sent for him into the hall, to see me, as I was going away. His hand was never a warm one; but, as I now took it, on greeting him, it was so deadly cold that it literally chilled mine for the moment. He only congratulated me, in the usual terms, on my safe return; and said that nothing had taken place in my absence—but in his utterance of those few words, I discovered, for the first time, a change in his voice: his tones were lower, and his articulation quicker than usual. This, joined to the extraordinary coldness of his hand, made me enquire whether he was unwell. Yes: he too had been ill while I was away—harassed a good deal with hard work, he said. Then, apologising for leaving me abruptly, on account of the letters he had brought with him, he re-

turned to Mr. Sherwin in the dining-room, with a greater appearance of hurry in his manner than I had ever remarked in it on former occasions.

I had left Margaret and Mr. Mannion both well — I returned, and found them both ill. Surely this was something that had taken place in my absence, though they all said that nothing had happened. But trifling illnesses seemed to be little regarded at North Villa — perhaps, because serious illness was perpetually present there, in the person of Mrs. Sherwin.

VI.

ABOUT six weeks after I had left the Hall, my father and Clara returned to London for the season.

Their arrival made no alteration in my habits. My sister and I now saw each other without embarrassment, and without a word about my secret on either side. My father's town engagements kept him, as usual, much apart from me—but it is not my intention to delay over my life either

at home, or at North Villa, during the spring or summer. This would be merely to repeat much of what has been already related. It is better to proceed at once to the closing period of my probation ; to a period that it taxes my resolution severely to write of at all.

I have gone on too far to recoil ; or else, now that a few more pages will bring me to—

—Weakness ! worse weakness than ever ! I must write on, and write all. A few weeks more of toil at my narrative, and the penance of this poor task-work will be over !

* * * * *

Imagine then, that the final day of my long year of expectation has arrived ; and that on the morrow, Margaret, for whose sake I have sacrificed and suffered so much, is at last really to be mine.

On the eve of the great change in my life that was now to take place, the relative positions in which I, and the different persons with whom I was associated, stood towards each other, may be sketched thus:—

My father's coldness of manner had not altered since his return to London. On my side, I carefully abstained from uttering a word before him, which bore the smallest reference to my real situation. Although when we met, we outwardly preserved the usual relations of parent and child, the estrangement between us had now become complete.

Clara did not fail to perceive this, and grieved over it in secret. Other and happier feelings, however, became awakened within her, when I privately hinted that the time for disclosing my secret to my sister was not far off. She grew almost as much agitated as I was, though by very different

expectations—she could think of nothing else but the explanation and the surprise in store for her. Sometimes, when I reflected on the natural excitability of her temperament, I almost feared to keep her any longer in suspense; and half regretted having said anything on the subject of the new and absorbing interest of my life, before the period when I could easily have said all.

Mr. Sherwin and I, had not latterly met on the most cordial terms. He was dissatisfied with me for not having boldly approached the subject of my marriage, in my father's presence; and considered my reasons for still keeping it secret, as dictated by morbid apprehension, and showing a total want of proper firmness. On the other hand, he was obliged to set against this omission on my part, the readiness I had shown in meeting his wishes on all remaining points. My life was insured in Mar-

garet's favour ; I had made the proper applications, in the proper quarters, for the first good official situation which might fall vacant ; and had arranged to be called to the bar immediately, so as to qualify myself in good time for every possible place within place-hunting range. My assiduity in making these preparations for securing Margaret's prospects and mine against any evil chances that might happen, failed in producing the favourable effect on Mr. Sherwin, which they must assuredly have produced on a less selfish man. But they obliged him, at least, to stop short at occasional grumblings about my reserve with my father, and to maintain towards me a sort of sulky politeness, which was, after all, less offensive than the usual infliction of his cordiality, with its unfailing accompaniment of dull stories and duller jokes.

During the spring and summer, Mrs.

Sherwin appeared to grow feebler and feebler, from continued ill-health. Occasionally, her words and actions—especially in her intercourse with me—suggested fears that her mind was beginning to give way, as well as her body. For instance, on one occasion, when Margaret had left the room for a minute or two, she suddenly hurried up to me, whispering with eager looks and anxious tones :—“ Watch over your wife—mind you watch over her, and keep all bad people from her ! *I've* tried to do it—mind *you* do it, too !” I asked immediately for some explanation of this extraordinary injunction ; but she only answered by muttering something about a mother's anxieties, and then returned hastily to her place. It was impossible to induce her to be more explicit, try how I might.

Margaret once or twice occasioned me much perplexity and distress, by certain in-

consistencies and variations in her manner, which began to appear shortly after my return to North Villa from the country. At one time, she would become, on a sudden, strangely sullen and silent — at another, irritable and capricious. And then, again, she would abruptly change to the most affectionate warmth of speech and demeanour, anxiously anticipating every wish I could form, eagerly showing her gratitude for the slightest attentions I paid her. These unaccountable alterations of manner, vexed and irritated me indescribably. I loved Margaret too well to be able to look philosophically on the imperfections of her character ; I knew of no cause given by me for the frequent changes in her conduct ; and, if they only proceeded from coquetry, then coquetry, as I once told her, was the last female accomplishment that could charm me in any woman whom I

really loved. However, these causes of annoyance and regret — her caprices, and my remonstrances—all passed happily away, as the term of my engagement with Mr. Sherwin approached its end. Margaret's better and lovelier manner seemed resumed, never again to be discarded. Occasionally, she might betray some symptoms of confusion, some evidences of unusual thoughtfulness—but I remembered how near was the day of the emancipation of our love, and looked on her embarrassment as a fresh charm, a new ornament to her beauty. There were moments, at this period of my life, when I almost trembled as I examined my own heart, and found how recklessly it had lavished forth the whole treasure of its devotion at Margaret's feet.

Mr. Mannion continued—as far as attention to my interests went—to be the same ready and reliable friend as ever; but he

was, in some other respects, an altered man. The illness of which he had complained months back, when I returned to London, seemed to have increased. His face was still the same cold, statuesque, impenetrable face which had so powerfully impressed me when I first saw him ; but his manner, hitherto so quiet and self-possessed, had now grown abrupt and variable. Sometimes, when I called him into the drawing-room at North Villa, to help us in the construction of any difficult passage in an Italian or German book (for Margaret and I still occasionally kept up our evening readings), he would suddenly stop before he had translated more than three or four words, murmur something, in a voice unlike his usual voice, about an attack of spasm and giddiness, and leave the room. These fits of illness had something in their nature of the same secrecy which distinguished

everything else connected with him: they produced no external signs of distortion, no unusual paleness in his face—you could not guess what pain he was suffering, or where he was suffering it. Latterly, I abstained from ever asking him to join us; for the effect on Margaret of his sudden attacks of illness was, naturally, such as to discompose her seriously for the remainder of the evening. Whenever I saw him accidentally, at later periods of the year, the influence of the genial summer season appeared to produce no alteration for the better in him. I remarked that his cold hand, which had chilled me when I took it on the raw winter night of my return from the country, was as cold as ever, on the warm summer days which preceded the close of my engagement at North Villa.

Such was the posture of affairs at home,

and at Mr. Sherwin's, when I went to see Margaret for the last time in my old character, on the last night which yet remained to separate us from each other.

I had been all day preparing for our reception, on the morrow, in a cottage which I had taken for a month, in a retired part of the country at some distance from London. One month's unalloyed happiness with Margaret, away from the world and all worldly considerations, was the Eden upon earth towards which my dearest hopes and anticipations had pointed for a whole year past—and now, now at last! those aspirations were really to be realized! All my arrangements at the cottage were completed in time to allow me to return home, just before our usual late dinner hour. During the meal, I provided for my month's absence from London, by pretexting to my father a visit to one of my country friends. He heard

me as coldly and indifferently as usual ; and, as I anticipated, did not even ask to what friend's house I was going. After dinner, I privately informed Clara that on the morrow, before starting, I would, in accordance with my promise, make her the depositary of my long-treasured secret—which, as yet, was not to be divulged to any one besides. This done, I hurried away, between nine and ten o'clock, for a last half-hour's visit to North Villa ; hardly able to realise my own situation, or to comprehend the fulness and exaltation of my own joy.

A disappointment was in store for me. Margaret was not in the house : she had gone out to an evening party, given by a maiden aunt of her's, who was known to be very rich, and was, accordingly, a person to be courted and humoured by the family.

I was angry as well as disappointed at

what had taken place. To send Margaret out, on this evening of all others, showed a want of consideration towards both of us, which revolted me. Mr. and Mrs. Sherwin were in the room when I entered; and to *him* I spoke my opinion on the subject, in no very conciliatory terms. He was suffering from a bad attack of headache, and a worse attack of ill-temper, and answered as irritably as he dared.

“ My good Sir ! ” said he, in sharp querulous tones, “ do, for once, allow me to know what’s best. You’ll have it all *your* way to-morrow—just let me have *mine*, for the last time, to-night. I’m sure you’ve been humoured often enough about keeping Margaret away from parties—and we should have humoured you this time, too: but a second letter came from the old lady, saying she should be huffed—regularly huffed—if Margaret wasn’t at her party. I couldn’t go

and talk her over, because of this infernal sick headache of mine—Hang it! it's your interest that Margaret should keep in with her aunt; she'll have all the old girl's money, if she only plays her cards decently well. That's why I sent her to the party—her going will be worth some thousands to both of you some of these days—she'll be back, too, by half-past twelve, or before. Mannion was asked; and though he's all out of sorts, he's gone to take care of her, and bring her back. I'll warrant she comes home in good time, when's *he's* with her. So you see there's nothing for anybody to make a fuss about, after all!"

It was certainly a considerable relief to hear that Mr. Mannion was taking care of Margaret. He was, in my opinion, much fitter for such a trust than her own father. Of all the good services he had done for me, I thought this the best—but it would

have been even better still, if he had prevented Margaret from going to the party.

“I must say again,” resumed Mr. Sherwin, still more irritably, finding I did not at once answer him, “I must say, there’s nothing that any reasonable being need make a fuss about. I’ve been doing everything for Margaret’s interests and your’s—and she’ll be back by twelve—and Mr. Mannion takes care of her—and I don’t know what you *would* have—and it’s devilish hard, so ill as I am too, to cut up rough with me like this—devilish hard !”

“I’m sorry for your illness, Mr. Sherwin ; and I don’t doubt your good intentions, or the advantage of Mr. Mannion’s protection for Margaret ; but I feel disappointed, nevertheless, that she should have gone out to-night ”

“I said she oughtn’t to go at all, whatever her aunt wrote—I said that.”

This bold speech actually proceeded from Mrs. Sherwin! I had never before heard her utter an opinion in her husband's presence—such an outburst from *her*, was perfectly inexplicable. She jerked out the words, too, with desperate rapidity, and unwonted power of tone, fixing her eyes all the while on me with a very strange expression.

“ Damn it, Mrs. S.!” roared her husband in a fury, “ *will* you hold your tongue? What the devil do you mean by giving *your* opinion, when nobody wants it? Upon my soul I begin to think you're getting a little cracked. You've been meddling and bothering lately in such a way, I don't know what the deuce has come to you! I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Basil,” he continued, turning snappishly round upon me, “ you'd better stop all this fuss of your's, by going to the party yourself. The old lady told

me she wanted gentlemen ; and would be glad to see any friends of mine I liked to send her. You've only got to mention my name : Mannion will do the civil in the way of introduction. There ! there's an envelop with the address to it—they won't know who you are, or what you are, at Margaret's aunt's—you've got your black dress thingummybobs on, all right and ready—for God's sake, go to the party yourself, and then I hope you'll be satisfied!"

Here he stopped ; and proceeded to vent the rest of his ill-humour by ringing the bell violently for "his arrow-root," and abusing the servant when she brought it.

I hesitated about accepting his proposal. While I was in doubt, Mrs. Sherwin took the opportunity, when her husband's eye was off her, of nodding her head at me significantly. She evidently wished me to join

Margaret at the party—but why? what did her behaviour mean?

It was useless to inquire. Long bodily suffering and weakness had but too palpably produced a corresponding feebleness in her intellect. What should I do? I was resolved to see Margaret that night; but to wait for her between two and three hours, in company with her father and mother, at North Villa, was an infliction not to be endured. I determined to go to the party. No one there would know anything about me. They would be all people who lived in a different world from mine; and whose manners and habits I might find some amusement in studying. At any rate, I should spend an hour or two with Margaret, and could make it my own charge to see her safely home. Without further hesitation, therefore, I took up the envelop

with the address on it, and bade Mr. and Mrs. Sherwin good-night.

It struck ten as I left North Villa. The moonlight which was just beginning to shine brilliantly on my arrival there, now appeared but at rare intervals; for the clouds were spreading thicker and thicker over the whole surface of the sky, as the night advanced.

VII.

THE address to which I was now proceeding; led me some distance away from Mr. Sherwin's place of abode, in the direction of the populous neighbourhood which lies on the western side of the Edgeware Road. The house of Margaret's aunt was plainly enough indicated to me, as soon as I entered the street where it stood, by the glare of light from the windows, the sound of dance-music, and the nondescript group of cab-men, linkmen, and footmen, with their little

train of idlers in attendance, assembled outside the door. It was evidently a very large party. I hesitated about going in.

My sensations were not those which fit a man for exchanging conventional civilities with perfect strangers; I felt that I showed outwardly the fever of joy and expectation within me. Could I keep up my assumed character of a mere friend of the family, in Margaret's presence?—and on this night too, of all others? There was little chance of it—it was far more probable that my behaviour, if I went to the party, would betray everything to everybody assembled. I determined to walk about in the neighbourhood of the house, until twelve o'clock; and then to go into the hall, and send up my card to Mr. Mannion, with a message on it, intimating that I was waiting below to accompany him to North Villa with Margaret.



I crossed the street, and looked up again at the house from the pavement opposite. Then lingered a little, listening to the music as it reached me through the windows, and imagining to myself Margaret's occupation at that moment. After this, I turned away; and set forth eastward on my walk, careless in which direction I traced my steps.

I felt little impatience, and no sense of fatigue; for, in less than two hours more I knew that I should see my wife again. Until then, the present had no existence for me—I lived in the past and future. I wandered indifferently along lonely bye-streets and crowded thoroughfares. Of all the sights which attend a night-walk in a great city, not one attracted my notice. Uninformed and unobservant, neither saddened nor startled, I passed through the glittering highways of London, amid all the appealing beauty and all the revolting horror of the hours of dark-

ness—those solemn hours, when Virtue and Vice approach each other closest in that sublime procession of human life, which halts not even under the black shadows of the Tombs, but sweeps onward past them, to stop only at the still sea that waits hushed under the Judgment Seat: those appalling hours, when the teeming city soil shows most terribly its evil growth of loathsome crime and spectral poverty, of destitution in its fierce dumbness, of idleness in its whining effrontery, of depravity in its reckless rage of drunken joy: those warning hours, when the living slough of degradation and disease, reeks its foulest around the aspiring trees of Wealth and Power, as they stretch forth their fast-growing branches in fatal security above it: those tearful hours, when even the sunshine spirits of Charity and Love, tremble as they toil mercifully onward to succour and to save !



Yes ! walking, as I then walked, amid that woful, wondrous pageant which London shows by night, I cared not once to look around me on my way. All sounds were silent to me, save the love-music of my own thoughts ; all sights had vanished before the bright form that moved through my bridal dream. Where was my world, at that moment ? Narrowed to the cottage in the country which was to receive us on the morrow. Where were the beings in the world ? All merged in one—Margaret.

Sometimes, my thoughts glided back, dreamily and voluptuously, to the day when I first met her. Sometimes, I recalled the summer evenings when we sat and read together out of the same book ; and, once more, it was as if I breathed with the breath, and hoped with the hopes, and longed with the old longings of those days. But oftenest it was with the morrow that my mind

was occupied. The first dream of all young men—the dream of living rapturously with the woman they love, in a secret retirement kept sacred from friends and from strangers, alike, was now my dream; and was to be realised in a few hours, to be realised with my waking on the morning which was already at hand!

For the last quarter of an hour of my walk, I must have been unconsciously retracing my steps towards the house of Margaret's aunt. I came in sight of it again, just as the sound of the neighbouring church clocks striking eleven, roused me from my abstraction. More cabs were in the street; more people were gathered about the door, by this time. Was all this bustle, the bustle of arrival, or of departure? Was the party about to break up, at an hour when parties usually begin? I determined to go nearer to the house, and

ascertain whether the music had ceased, or not.

I had approached close enough to hear the notes of the harp and pianoforte still sounding as gaily as ever, when the house-door was suddenly flung open for the departure of a lady and gentleman. The light from the hall-lamps fell full on their faces ; and showed me Margaret and Mr. Mannon.

Going home already ! An hour and a half before it was time to return ! Why ? There could be but one reason. Margaret was thinking of me, and of what I should feel if I called at North Villa, and had to wait for her till past midnight. I ran forward to speak to them, as they descended the steps ; but, exactly at the same moment, my voice was overpowered, and my further progress barred, by a scuffle on the pavement among the people who stood between us.

One man swore that his pocket had been picked ; others roared to him that they had caught the thief. There was a fight—the police came up—I was surrounded on all sides by a shouting, struggling mob that seemed to have gathered in an instant.

Before I could force myself out of the crowd, and escape into the road, Margaret and Mr. Mannion had hurried into a cab. I just saw the vehicle driving off rapidly, as I got free. An empty cab was standing near me—I jumped into it directly—and told the man to overtake them. After having waited my time so patiently, to let a mere accident stop me from going home with them, as I had resolved, was not to be thought of for a moment. I was hot and angry, after my contest with the crowd ; and could have flogged on the miserable cab-horse with my own hand, rather than have failed in my purpose.

We were just getting closer behind them ; I had just put my head out of the window to call to them, and to bid the man who was driving me, call, too — when their cab abruptly turned down a bye-street, in a direction exactly opposite to the direction which led to North Villa.

What did this mean ? Why were they not going straight home ?

The cabman asked me whether he should not hail them before they got farther away from us ; frankly confessing, as he put the question, that his horse was nothing like equal to the pace of the horse ahead. Involuntarily and mechanically, without assignable purpose or motive, I declined his offer, and told him simply to follow at any distance he could. While the words passed my lips, a strange sensation stole over me : I seemed to be speaking as the mere mouthpiece of some other voice. From

feeling hot, and moving about restlessly the moment before, I felt unaccountably cold all over, and sat quite still now. What caused this?

My cab stopped. I looked out, and saw that the horse had fallen. "We've lots of time, Sir," said the driver, as he coolly stepped off the box, "they're just pulling up further down the road." I gave him some money, and got out immediately—determined to walk up to them.

It was a very lonely place—a colony of half-finished streets, and half-inhabited houses, which had grown up in the neighbourhood of a great railway station. I heard the fierce scream of the whistle, and the heaving, heavy throb of the engine starting on its journey, as I advanced along the gloomy Square in which I now found myself. The cab I had been following stood at a turning which led into a long

street, occupied, towards the farther end, by shops already closed for the night, and at the end nearest me, apparently by private houses only. Margaret and Mr. Mannion hastily left the cab, and without looking either to the right or the left, hurried down the street. They stopped just in time to hear the door closed on them, and to count the number of doors intervening between that door and the Square.

The awful thrill of a suspicion which I hardly knew yet for what it really was, began to creep over me—to creep like a dead-cold touch crawling through and through me to the heart. I looked up at the house. It was a hotel — a deserted, dreary-looking building. Still acting mechanically; still with no definite impulse that I could recognise, even if I felt it, except the vague, instinctive resolution to follow them into the

house, as I had already followed them through the street—I walked up to the door, and rang the bell.

It was answered by a waiter — a mere lad. As the light in the passage fell on my face, he paused in the act of addressing me, and drew back a few steps. Without stopping for any explanations, I closed the door behind me, and said to him at once:

“A lady and gentleman came into this hotel a little while ago.”

“What may your business be?” — He hesitated, and added in an altered tone, “I mean what may you want with them, Sir?”

“I want you to take me where I can hear their voices, and I want nothing more. Here’s a sovereign for you, if you do what I ask.”

His eyes fastened covetously on the gold, as I held it before them. Then he retired

a few steps on tiptoe, and listened at the end of the passage. I heard nothing but the thick, rapid beating of my own heart, at that moment. He came back, muttering to himself: "Master's safe at supper down stairs—I'll risk it ! You'll promise to go away directly," he added, whispering to me, " and not disturb the house ? We are quiet people here, and can't have anything like a row. Just say at once, will you promise to step soft, and not speak a word ?"

" Yes—I promise."

" This way then, Sir — and mind you don't forget to step soft."

A strange coldness and stillness, an icy insensibility, a dream-sensation of being impelled by some hidden, irresistible agency, possessed me, as I followed him up-stairs. He showed me softly into an empty room ; pointed to one of the walls, whispering, " It's only boards papered over," and then

waited, keeping his eyes anxiously and steadily fixed upon all my movements.

I listened ; and through the thin partition, I heard voices—*her* voice, and *his* voice. *I heard and I knew*—knew my degradation in all its infamy, knew my wrongs in all their nameless horror. He was exulting in the satanic patience and secrecy which had brought success to the foul plot, foully hidden for months on months, foully matured on the very day before I was to have claimed as my loved and honoured wife, a wretch as guilty as himself !

I could neither move, nor breathe. The blood surged and heaved upward to my brain ; my heart strained and writhed in anguish ; the life within me, raged and tore to get free. Whole years of the direst mental and bodily agony were concentrated in that one moment of dumb, helpless, motionless torment. I never lost the con-

sciousness of suffering. I heard the waiter say, under his breath, "My God! he's dying." I felt him loosen my cravat—I knew that he dashed cold water over me; dragged me out of the room; and, opening a window on the landing, held me firmly where the night-air blew upon my face. I knew all this; and knew when the paroxysm passed, and nothing remained of it, but an ague-fit in every muscle, a shivering helplessness in every nerve.

Ere long, the power of thinking began to return to me. Misery, and shame, and horror, and a vain yearning to hide myself from all human eyes, and weep out my life in secret, overcame me. Then, these subsided; and ONE THOUGHT slowly and stealthily arose in their stead, and cast down before it every obstacle of conscience, every principle of education, every care for the future, every remembrance of the past,

every weakening influence of present misery, every repressing tie of family and home, every anxiety for good fame in this life, and every idea of the next that was to come. Before the fell poison of that Thought, all other thoughts—good, or evil—died. As it spoke secretly within me, I felt my bodily strength coming back; a quick, fierce vigour leapt hotly through my frame. I turned, and looked round towards the room we had just left—my mind was looking at the room beyond it, the room *they* were in.

The waiter was still standing by my side, watching me intently. He suddenly started back; and, with pale face and staring eyes, pointed down the stairs.

“ You go !” he whispered, “ go directly ! You’re well now—I’m afraid to have you here any longer. I saw your look, your horrid look at that room ! You’ve heard

what you wanted for your money—go at once; or, if I lose my place for it, I'll call out Murder, and raise the house. And mind this: as true as God's in Heaven, I'll warn them both before they go outside our door!"

Hearing, but not heeding him, I left the house. No voice that ever spoke, no tenderness, no eloquence, no warning entreaty—could have called me back from the course on which I was now bound. The waiter watched me vigilantly from the door, as I went out. Seeing this, I made a circuit, before I returned to the spot where, as I had suspected, the cab they had ridden in was still waiting for them.

The driver was asleep inside. I awoke him; told him I had been sent to say that he was not wanted again that night; and secured his ready departure, by at once paying him on his own terms. He drove off;

and the first obstacle on the fatal path which I had resolved to tread unopposed, was now removed. As the cab disappeared from my sight, I looked up at the sky. It was growing very dark. The ragged, black clouds, fantastically parted from each other in island shapes over the whole surface of the heavens, were fast drawing together into one huge, formless, lowering mass ; and had already hidden the moon for good. I went back to the street, and stationed myself in the pitch darkness of a passage which led down a mews, situated exactly opposite to the hotel.

In the silence and obscurity, in the sudden pause of action, while I now waited and watched, my Thought rose to my lips, and my speech instinctively formed it into words. I whispered softly to myself: *I will kill him when he comes out.* My mind never swerved for an instant from this thought—



never swerved towards myself; never swerved towards *her*. Grief was numbed at my heart; and the consciousness of my own misery was numbed with grief. Death chills all before it—and Death and my Thought were one.

Once, while I stood on the watch, a sharp agony of suspense tried me fiercely. Just as I had calculated that the time was come which would force them to depart, in order to return to North Villa by the appointed hour, I heard the slow, heavy, regular tramp of a footstep advancing along the street. It was the policeman of the district, going his round. As he approached the entrance to the mews, he paused, yawned, stretched his arms, and began to whistle a tune. If Mannion should come out, while he was there! My blood seemed to stagnate on its course, while I thought that this might well happen. Suddenly, the man ceased

whistling, looked steadily up and down the street, and tried the door of a house near him—advanced a few steps—then paused again, and tried another door—then muttered to himself, in drowsy tones: “Stop! I’ve seen all safe here, already: it’s the other street I forgot just now.” He turned; and retraced his way. I fixed my aching eyes vigilantly on the hotel, while I heard the sound of his footsteps grow fainter and fainter in the distance—it ceased altogether; and still there was no change; still the man whose life I was waiting for, never appeared.

Ten minutes after this, so far as I can guess, the door opened; and I heard Manganion’s voice, and the voice of the waiter who had let me in. “Look about you before you go out,” said the latter, speaking in the passage: “the street’s not safe for you.” Disbelieving, or affecting to dis-

believe, what he heard, Mannion interrupted the waiter angrily ; and endeavoured to reassure his companion in guilt, by asserting that the warning was nothing but an attempt to extort money by way of reward. The man retorted sulkily, that he cared nothing for the gentleman's money, or the gentleman either. Immediately afterwards an inner door in the house banged violently ; and I knew that Mannion had been left to his fate.

Then, there was a momentary silence ; and then I heard him tell his accomplice that he would go alone to look for the cab, and that she had better close the door and wait quietly in the passage till he came back. This was done. He walked out into the street. It was after twelve o'clock. No sound of a strange foot-fall was audible—no soul was at hand to witness, and prevent, the coming

struggle. His life was mine. His death followed him, as fast as my feet followed, while I was now walking on his track.

He looked up and down, from the entrance to the street, for the cab. Then, seeing that it was gone, he hastily turned back. At that instant, I met him face to face. Before a word could be spoken, even before a look could be exchanged, my hands were on his throat.

He was a taller and heavier man than I was; and struggled with me, knowing that he was struggling for his life. He never shook my grasp on him for a moment; but he dragged me out into the road—dragged me away eight or ten yards from the street. The heavy gasps of approaching suffocation beat thick on my forehead from his open mouth: he swerved to and fro furiously, from side to side; and struck at me wildly, swinging his clenched

fists high above his head. I stood firm ; and held him away at arm's length. As I dug my feet into the ground to steady myself, I heard the crunching of stones—the road had been newly mended with granite. Instantly, a savage purpose goaded into fury the deadly resolution by which I was animated. I shifted my hold to the back of his neck, and the collar of his coat ; and hurled him, with the whole impetus of the raging strength that possessed me, face downwards, on to the stones.

In the mad, bloodthirsty triumph of that moment, I had already stooped towards him, as he lay insensible—dead perhaps—beneath me, to lift him again, and beat out of him, on the granite, not life only, but the semblance of humanity, as well—when, in the blank stillness that followed the struggle, I heard the door of the hotel in the street open once more.

I left him directly; and ran back from the Square—I knew not with what motive, or what idea—to the spot.

On the steps of the house, on the threshold of the accursed place that had been the scene of her guilt, stood the woman whom God's minister had given to me, in the sight of God, as my wife.

One long pang of shame and despair shot through my heart, as I looked on her; and tortured out of its trance the spirit within me. It was as if I had awokened from a loathsome dream, to a reality more loathsome still. Thousands on thousands of thoughts seemed to be whirling in the wildest confusion through and through my brain—thoughts whose track was a track of fire—thoughts that struck me with a hellish torment of dumbness, at the very time when I would have purchased with my life the power

of a moment's speech. Voiceless and tearless, I went up to her, and took her by the arm, and drew her away from the house. There was some vague purpose in me, as I did this, of never quitting my hold of her, never letting her stir from me by so much as an inch, until I had spoken certain words to her. What words they were, and when I should utter them, I could not tell.

The cry for mercy was on her lips ; but the instant our eyes met, it died away in long, low, hysterical moanings. Her cheeks were ghastly ; her features were rigid ; her eyes glared like an idiot's—guilt and terror had made her hideous to look upon already.

I drew her onward a few paces towards the Square. Then I stopped, remembering the body that lay, face downwards, on the road. All the savage, animal strength of a few moments before, had left me

from the time when I first saw her. I now reeled where I stood, from sheer physical weakness. The sound of her pantings and shudderings, of her abject, inarticulate murmurings for mercy, struck me with a supernatural terror. My fingers trembled round her arm—the perspiration dripped down my face, like rain—I caught at the railings by my side, to keep myself from falling. As I did so, she snatched her arm from my grasp, as easily as if I had been a child; and, uttering a suppressed cry for help, fled towards the further end of the street.

Still, the strange instinct of never losing hold of her, influenced me: I followed, staggering like a drunken man. In a moment, she was out of my reach—in another, out of my sight. I went on, nevertheless; on, and on, and on, I knew not whither. I lost all ideas of time and

distance. Sometimes, I went round and round the same streets, over and over again. Sometimes I hurried in one direction, straight forward. Wherever I went, it seemed to me that she was still just before ; that *her* track and *my* track were one ; that I had just lost my hold of her, and that she was just starting on her flight.

I remember passing two men in this way, in some great thoroughfare. They both stopped, turned, and walked a few steps after me. One laughed at me, as a drunkard. The other, in serious tones, told him to be silent ; for I was not drunk, but mad—he had seen my face as I passed, under a gas-lamp ; and he knew that I was mad.

“MAD!”—that word, as I heard it, rang after me, like a voice of judgment, like a knell tolling for the death of my spirit, from the spirit-world. “MAD!”—a fear had come over me, which, in all its frightful

complication, was expressed by that one word—a fear, which, to the man who suffers it, is worse even than the fear of death ; which no human language ever has conveyed, or ever will convey, in all its horrible reality, to others. I had pressed onward hitherto, because I saw a vision that led me after it—a beckoning shadow, ahead, darker even than the night darkness. I still pressed on, now ; but only because I was afraid to stop.

I know not how far I had gone, when my strength utterly failed me, and I sank down helpless, in a lonely place where the houses were few and scattered, and trees and fields were dimly discernible in the obscurity beyond. I hid my face in my hands, and tried to assure myself that I was still in possession of my senses. I strove hard to separate my thoughts ; to distinguish between my recollections ; to

extricate from the confusion within me any one idea, no matter what—and I could not do it. In that awful struggle for the mastery over my own mind, all that had passed, all the horror of that horrible night, became as nothing to me. I raised myself, and looked up again, and tried to steady my reason by the simplest means—even by endeavouring to count all the houses within sight. The darkness bewildered me. Darkness?—Was it dark?—Or, was day breaking yonder, far away in the murky eastern sky?—Did I know what I saw?—Did I see the same thing for a few moments together?—What was this under me?—Grass?—Yes! cold, soft, dewy grass. I bent down my forehead upon it; and tried, for the last time, to steady my faculties by praying; tried if I could utter the prayer which I had known, and repeated every day, from childhood—the Lord's Prayer. The Divine Words came not at my

call—no ! not one of them, from the beginning to the end !—I started up on my knees. A blaze of lurid sunshine flashed before my eyes : a hell-blaze of brightness, with fiends by millions, raining down out of it on my head—then, a rayless darkness, the darkness of the blind — then God's mercy, at last : the mercy of utter oblivion.

* * * * *

When I recovered my consciousness, I was lying on the couch in my own study. My father was supporting me on the pillow ; the doctor had his fingers on my pulse ; and a policeman was telling them how he had found me, and brought me home.

P A R T I I I.



I.

WHEN the blind are operated on for the restoration of sight, the same succouring hand which has opened to them the visible world, immediately shuts out the bright prospect again, for a time. A bandage is passed over the eyes, lest in the first tenderness of their recovered sense, they should be fatally affected by the sudden transition from darkness to light. But, between the awful blank of total privation of vision, and the

temporary blank of vision merely veiled, there lies the widest difference. In the moment of their restoration, the blind have had one glimpse of light, flashing on them in an overpowering gleam of brightness, which the thickest closest veiling cannot extinguish. The new darkness is not like the void darkness of old: it is filled with rapid, changing visions of brilliant colours and ever-varying forms, rising, falling, whirling hither and thither with every second. Thus, even when the handkerchief is passed over them, the once sightless eyes, though bandaged fast, are yet not blinded as they were before.

It was so with my mental vision. After the utter oblivion and darkness of a deep swoon, consciousness flashed like light on my mind, when I found myself in my father's presence and in my own home. But, almost at the very moment when I first

awakened to the bewildering influence of that sight, a new darkness fell upon my faculties—a darkness, this time, which was not utter oblivion ; a peopled darkness, like that which the bandage casts over the opened eyes of the blind.

I had sensations, I had thoughts, I had visions, now—but they all acted in the frightful self-concentration of delirium. The lapse of time, the march of events, the alteration of day and night, the persons who moved about me, the words they spoke, the offices of kindness they did for me—all these were annihilated from the period when I closed my eyes again, after having opened them for an instant on my father, in my own study.

My first sensation (how soon it came after I had been brought home, I know not) was of a terrible heat ; a steady, blazing heat, which seemed to have shrivelled and burnt

up the whole of the little world around me, and to have left me alone to suffer, but never to consume in it. After this, came a quick, restless, unintermittent toiling of obscure thought, ever in the same darkened sphere, ever on the same impenetrable subject, ever failing to reach some distant and visionary result. It was as if something were imprisoned in my mind, and moving always to and fro in it — moving but never getting free.

Soon, these thoughts began to take a form that I could recognise. In the clinging heat and fierce seething fever, to which neither waking nor sleeping brought a breath of freshness or a dream of change, I began to act my part over again, in the events that had passed—but in a strangely altered character. Now, instead of placing implicit trust in others, as I had done; instead of failing to discover a significance and a

warning in each circumstance as it arose, I was suspicious from the first—suspicious of Margaret, of her father, of her mother, of Mannion, of the very servants in the house. In the hideous phantasmagoria of my own calamity on which I now looked, my position was reversed. Every event of the doomed year of my probation was revived. But the doom itself; the night-scene of horror through which I had passed; the brief terrible catastrophe of the weary drama of wickedness and deceit, had utterly vanished from my memory. This lost recollection, it was the one unending toil of my wandering mind to recover; and I never got it back. None who have not suffered as I suffered then, can imagine with what a burning rage of determination I followed past events in my delirium, one by one, for days and nights together—followed, to get to the end which I knew was beyond; but

which I never could see, not even by glimpses, for a moment at a time.

However my visions (no words can picture their ghastly distinctness !) might alter in their course of succession, they always began with the night when Mannion returned from the continent to North Villa. I stood again in the drawing-room ; I saw him enter ; I marked the slight confusion of Margaret ; and instantly doubted her. I noticed his unwillingness to meet her eye or mine ; I looked on the sinister stillness of his face ; and suspected him. From that moment, love vanished, and hatred came in its place. I began to watch ; to garner up slight circumstances which confirmed my suspicions ; to wait craftily for the day when I should discover, judge, and punish them both—the day of disclosure and retribution that never came.

Sometimes, I was again with Mannion,



in his house, on the night of the storm. I detected in every word he spoke, an artful lure to trap me into trusting him as my second father, more than as my friend. I heard in the tempest-sounds which mysteriously interrupted, or mingled with, my answers, voices supernaturally warning me of my enemy, each time that I spoke to him. I saw once more the hideous smile of triumph on his face, as I took leave of him on the doorstep: and saw it, this time, not as an illusion produced by a flash of lightning, but as a frightful reality which the lightning disclosed.

Sometimes, I was again in the garden at North Villa, accidentally overhearing the conversation between Margaret and her mother — overhearing what deceit and disobedience she was willing to commit, for the sake of getting a new dress — then going into the room, and seeing her assume her

usual manner on meeting me, as if no such words as I had listened to but the moment before, had ever proceeded from her lips. Or, I saw her on that other morning, when to revenge the death of her bird, she would have killed with her own hand the one pet companion that her sick mother possessed. Now, no generous, trusting love blinded me to the real meaning of such events as these. Now, instead of regarding them as little weaknesses and errors which beauty made excusable, and youth made eradicable, I saw them as timely warnings ; momentous disclosures which bade me remember when the day of my vengeance came, that in the contriving of the iniquity on which they were both bent, the woman had been as vile as the man.

Sometimes, I was once more on my way to North Villa, after my week's absence at our country house. I saw again the

change in Margaret since I had left her —the paleness, the restlessness, the appearance of agitation. I took the hand of Mannion, and started as I felt its deadly coldness and remarked the strange alteration in his manner. When they accounted for these changes by telling me that both had been ill, in different ways, since my departure, I detected the miserable lie at once; and knew that an evil advantage had been taken of my absence; that the plot against me was fast advancing towards consummation; and that, at the sight of their victim, even the two wretches who were compassing my dishonour could not repress all outward manifestation of their guilt.

Sometimes, the figure of Mrs. Sherwin appeared to me, wan and weary, and mournful with a ghostly mournfulness. Again I watched her, and listened to her; but now with eager curiosity, with breathless atten-

tion. Once more, I saw her shudder when Mannion's hard, cold eyes turned on her face—I marked the anxious, imploring look that she cast on Margaret and on me—I heard her confused unwilling answer, when I inquired the cause of her dislike of the man in whom her husband placed the most implicit trust—I listened to her abrupt, inexplicable injunction to “watch continually over my wife, and keep bad people from her.” All these different circumstances occurred again as vividly as in the reality; but I did not now account for them, as I had once accounted for them, by convincing myself that Mrs. Sherwin's mind was wandering, and that her bodily sufferings had affected her intellect. I saw immediately, that she suspected Mannion, and dared not openly confess her suspicions; I saw, that in the stillness, and abandonment, and self-concentration of her neglected life,

she had been watching more vigilantly than others had watched; I detected in every one of her poor despised gestures, and looks, and halting words, the same concealed warning ever lying beneath the surface; I knew they had not succeeded in deceiving *her*; I was determined they should not succeed in deceiving *me*.

It was oftenest at this point that my restless memory recoiled before the impenetrable darkness which forbade it to see further—to see on to the last evening, to the fatal night. It was oftenest at this point that I toiled and struggled back, over and over again, to seek once more the lost events of the End, through the events of the Beginning. How often my wandering thoughts thus incessantly and desperately traced and retraced their way over their own fever-track, I cannot tell: but there came a time when they suddenly ceased to tor-

ment me ; when I remembered nothing and sought for nothing more ; when the heavy burden that was on my mind fell off, and a sudden strength and fury possessed me, and I plunged down through a vast darkness into a world whose daylight was all radiant flame. Giant phantoms mustered by millions, flashing white as lightning in the ruddy air. They rushed on me with hurricane-speed ; their wings fanned me with fiery breezes ; and the echo of their thunder-music was like the groaning and rending of an earthquake, as they tore me away with them on their whirlwind course.

Away ! to a City of Palaces, to measureless halls, and arches, and domes, soaring one above another, till their flashing ruby summits are lost in the burning void, high overhead. On ! through and through these mountain-piles, into countless, limitless corridors, reared on pillars lurid and rosy as molten lava.

Far down the corridors rise visions of flying phantoms, ever at the same distance before us—their raving voices clang like the hammers of a thousand forges. Still on and on; faster and faster, for days, years, centuries together, till there comes, stealing slowly forward to meet us, a shadow—a vast, stealthy, gliding shadow—the first darkness that has ever been shed over that world of blazing light! It comes nearer—nearer and nearer softly, till it touches the front ranks of our phantom troop. Then, in an instant, our rushing progress is checked: the thunder-music of our wild march stops; the raving voices of the spectres ahead, cease; a horror of blank stillness is all about us—and as the shadow creeps onward and onward, until we are enveloped in it from front to rear, we shiver with icy cold under the fiery air and amid the lurid lava pillars which hem us in on either side.

A silence, like no silence ever known on earth; a darkening of the shadow, blacker than the blackest night in the thickest wood—a pause—then, a sound as of the heavy air being cleft asunder; and then, an apparition of two figures coming on out of the shadow—two monsters stretching forth their gnarled yellow talons to grasp at us; leaving on their track a green decay, oozing and shining with a sickly light. Beyond and around me, as I stood in the midst of them, the phantom troop dropped into formless masses, while the monsters advanced. They came close to me; and I alone, of all the myriads around, changed not at their approach. Each laid a talon on my shoulder—each raised a veil which was one hideous net-work of twining worms. I saw through the ghastly corruption of their faces the look that told me who they were—the monstrous iniquities incarnate in

monstrous forms ; the fiend-souls made visible in fiend-shapes—Margaret and Mannion !

A moment more ! and I was alone with those two. Not a wreck of the phantom-magnitude remained ; the towering city, the gleaming corridors, the fire-bright radiance had vanished. We stood on a wilderness—a still black lake of dead waters was before us ; a white, faint, misty light shone on us. Outspread over the noisome, swampy ground lay the ruins of a house, rooted up and overthrown to its foundations. The demon figures, still watching on either side of me, drew me slowly forward to the fallen stones, and pointed to two dead bodies lying among them.

My father !—my sister !—both cold and still, and whiter than the white light that showed them to me. The demons at my side, stretched out their crooked talons, and forbade me to kneel before my father, or to

kiss Clara's wan face, before I went to torment. They struck me motionless where I stood—they leapt in their pollution upon each fair, pure corpse, and unveiled their hideous faces once more, jeering at me in triumph. Anon, the lake of black waters heaved up and overflowed, and noiselessly sucked us away into its centre depths—depths that were endless ; depths of rayless darkness, in which we slowly eddied round and round, deeper and deeper down at every turn. I felt the bodies of my father and my sister touching me in cold contact: I stretched out my arms to clasp them and sink with them ; and the demon pair glided between us, and separated me from them. This vain striving to join myself to my dead kindred when we touched each other in the slow, endless whirlpool, ever continued and was ever frustrated in the same way Still we sank apart, down the black gulphs

of the lake ; still there was no light, no sound, no change, no pause of repose—and this was eternity : the eternity of Hell !

* * * * *

Such was one dream-vision out of many that I saw. It must have been at this time that men were set to watch me day and night (as I afterwards heard) in order that I might be held down in my bed, when a paroxysm of convulsive strength made me dangerous to myself and to all about me. The period too when the doctors announced that the fever had seized on my brain, and was getting the better of their skill, must have been *this* period.

But though they gave up my life as lost, I was not to die. There came a time, at last, when the gnawing fever lost its hold ; and I awoke faintly, one morning, to a new existence—to a life frail and helpless as the

life of a new-born babe. I was too weak to move, to speak, to open my eyes, to exert in the smallest degree any one faculty, bodily or mental, that I possessed. The first sense of which I regained the use, was the sense of hearing ; and the first sound that I recognised, was of a light footstep which mysteriously approached, paused, and then retired again gently, outside my door. The hearing of this sound was my first pleasure, the waiting for its repetition my first source of happy expectation, since I had been ill. Once more the footsteps approached — paused a moment — then seemed to retire as before — then returned slowly. A sigh, very faint and trembling ; a whisper of which I could not yet distinguish the import, caught my ear — and after that, there was silence. Still I waited (oh, how happily and calmly !) to hear the whisper soon repeated, and to hear it better when it

next came. Ere long, for the third time, the footsteps advanced, and the whispering accents sounded again. I could now hear that they pronounced my name—once, twice, three times—very softly and imploringly, as if to beg the answer which I was still too weak to give. But I knew the voice: I knew it was Clara's. Long after it had ceased, the whisper lingered gently on my ear, like a sweet, simple lullaby that alternately soothed me to slumber and welcomed me to wakefulness. It seemed to be strangely thrilling through my frame with a tender, reviving influence—the same influence which the sunshine had, weeks afterwards, when I enjoyed it for the first time out of doors.

The next sound that came to me was audible in my room; audible, sometimes, close at my pillow. It was the simplest sound imaginable—nothing but the soft,

monotonous rustling of a woman's dress. And yet, I heard in it innumerable harmonies, sweet changes and pauses minute beyond all definition. I could only open my eyes for a minute at a time, and even then, could not fix them steadily on anything ; but I knew that the rustling dress was Clara's ; and fresh sensations seemed to throng upon me, as I listened to the sound which told me that she was in the room. I felt the soft summer air on my face ; I enjoyed the sweet scent of flowers, wafted on that air ; and, once, when my door was left open for a moment, the twittering of birds in the aviary down stairs, rang with exquisite clearness and sweet-ness on my ear. It was thus that my faculties strengthened, hour by hour, always in the same gradual way, from the time when I first heard the footstep and the whisper outside my chamber door.

One evening I awoke from a long, cool, dreamless sleep; and, seeing Clara sitting by my bedside, faintly uttered her name, and moved my wasted hand to take her's. As I saw the calm, familiar face bending over me; the anxious eyes looking tenderly and lovingly into mine—as the last melancholy glory of sunset hovered on my bed; and the air, sinking already into its twilight repose, came softly and more softly into the room—as my sister took me in her arms, and, raising me on my weary pillow, bade me for *her* sake lie hushed and patient yet a little longer—the memory of the ruin and the shame that had overwhelmed me; the memory of my love that had become an infamy; and of my brief year's hope, miserably fulfilled by a life of despair, swelled darkly and sadly over my heart. The red, retiring rays of sunset just lingered at that moment on my face.

Clara knelt down by my pillow, and held up her handkerchief to shade my eyes — “God has given you back to us, Basil,” she whispered, “to make us happier than ever.” As she spoke, the springs of the grief so long pent up within me, were loosened; hot tears dropped heavily and quickly from my eyes; and I wept for the first time since the night of horror which had stretched me where I now lay—wept in my sister’s arms, at that quiet evening hour, for the lost honour, the lost hope, the lost happiness that had gone from me for ever in my youth !

II.

DARKLY and wearily the days of my recovery went on. After that first outburst of sorrow, on the evening when I recognised my sister and murmured her name as she sat by my side, there sank over all my faculties a dull, heavy trance of mental pain. I dare not describe what remembrances of the guilty woman who had deceived and ruined me, now gnawed unceasingly and

poisonously at my heart. My bodily strength feebly revived; but my mental energies never showed a sign of recovering with them. My father's considerate forbearance, Clara's sorrowful reserve in touching on the subject of my long illness, or of the wild words which had escaped me in my delirium, mutely and gently warned me that the time was come when I owed the tardy atonement of confession to the family that I had disgraced—and still, I had no courage to speak, no resolution to endure. The great misery of the past, shut out from me the present and the future alike—every active power of my mind seemed to be destroyed hopelessly and for ever.

There were moments—most often at the early morning hours, while the heaviness of the night's sleep still hung over me in my wakefulness—when I could hardly realise the calamity which had overwhelmed me; when

it seemed that I must have dreamt, during the night, of scenes of crime and woe and heavy trial which had never actually taken place. And was there not, in truth, an incredible maturity of corruptness in *her* iniquity? I had given up to this young girl all that man could resign; I had accumulated, throughout a whole year, proof on proof of the sincerity, the devotion, the inexhaustible self-denial of my love—where could reasons be found for such a foul and horrible return, on her part, to all that I had offered, to all that I had conferred, to all that I had yet to give? Where could a parallel be discovered for the accursed perfection of hypocrisy which had concealed the conspiracy from me, for months on months; or, had at most, only shown its progress on rare occasions, by such slight, faint signs as no generous, trusting nature could ever have discerned? What was the

secret of the terrible influence, which—let her even be the vilest of the vile—Mannion *must* have possessed over Margaret Sherwin, to induce her to sacrifice me to him? Even the crime itself was not more hideous and more incredible than the mystery in which its evil motives, and the manner of its evil ripening were still impenetrably veiled.

Mannion! It was a strange result of the mental malady under which I suffered, that, though the thought of Mannion was now inextricably connected with every thought of Margaret, I never once asked myself, or had an idea of asking myself, for days together after my convalescence, what had been the issue of our struggle, for *him*. In the despair of first awakening to a perfect sense of the calamity which had been hurled on me from the hand of my own wife; in the misery of first clearly connecting together, after the wanderings of delirium, the Mar-

garet to whom with my hand, I had given all my heart, with the Margaret who had trampled on the gift and ruined the giver, all minor thoughts and minor feelings, all motives of revengeful curiosity or of personal apprehension were suppressed. And yet, the time was soon to arrive when that lost thought of inquiry into Mannion's fate, was to become the one master-thought that possessed me—the thought that gave back its vigilance to my intellect, and its manhood to my heart.

One evening, I was sitting alone in my room. My father had taken Clara out for a little air and exercise, and the servant had gone away at my own desire. It was in this quiet and solitude, when the darkness was fast approaching, when the view from my window was at its loneliest, when my mind was growing listless and confused as the weary day wore out—it was exactly

at this time that the thought suddenly and mysteriously flashed across me: Had Manton been taken up from the stones on which I had hurled him, a living man or a dead?

I instinctively started to my feet with something of the vigour of my former health; repeating the question to myself, and feeling, as I unconsciously murmured aloud the few words which expressed it, that my life had purposes and duties, trials and achievements, which were yet to be fulfilled. How could I instantly solve the momentous doubt which was now, for the first time, started in my mind?

One moment I paused in eager consideration—the next, I descended to the library. A daily newspaper was kept there filed for reference. I might possibly decide the fatal question in a few moments by consulting it. In my burning anxiety and impatience I

could hardly handle the leaves, or see the letters, as I tried to turn back to the right date—the day (oh anguish of remembrance!) on which I was to have claimed Margaret Sherwin as my wife!

At last, I found the number I desired; but the closely-printed columns swam before me as I looked at them. A glass of water stood on a table near me—I dipped my handkerchief in it, and cooled my throbbing eyes. The destiny of my future life might be decided by the discovery I was now about to make!

I locked the door to guard against all intrusion, and then returned to my task—returned to my momentous search; slowly tracing my way through the paper, paragraph by paragraph, column by column. On the last page and close to the end, I read this:

"MYSTERIOUS OCCURRENCE.

"About one o'clock this morning, a gentleman was discovered lying on his face in the middle of the road, in — Square, by the policeman on duty. The unfortunate man was to all appearance dead. He had fallen on a part of the road which had been recently macadamised; and his face, we are informed, is frightfully mutilated by contact with the granite. The policeman immediately conveyed him to — Hospital, where it was discovered that he was still alive, and the promptest attentions were immediately paid him. We understand that the surgeon in attendance considers it absolutely impossible that he could have been injured as he was, except by having been violently thrown down on his face, either by a

“ vehicle driven at a furious rate, or by a
“ savage attack from some person or per-
“ sons, unknown. In the latter case,
“ robbery could not have been the mo-
“ tive; for the unfortunate man’s watch,
“ purse, and ring, were all found about
“ him. No cards of address, or letters of
“ any kind were discovered in his pockets,
“ and his linen and handkerchief were only
“ marked with the letter, M. He was
“ dressed in evening costume—entirely in
“ black. After what has been already said
“ about the injuries to his face, any recog-
“ nisable personal description of him is, for
“ the present, unfortunately out of the
“ question. We wait with much anxiety
“ to gain some further insight into this
“ mysterious affair when the sufferer is
“ restored to consciousness. The last par-
“ ticulars which our reporter was able to
“ collect at the hospital were, that the

“surgeon expected to save his patient’s life, and the sight of one of his eyes. “The sight of the other is understood to be entirely destroyed.”

A heart-sickness and loathing, caused by feelings which I could not then, and cannot now, analyse, overcame me, as I read the paragraph which I have just quoted. Eagerly and hurriedly, I turned to the next day’s paper; but found in it no further reference to the object of my search. In the number for the day after, however, the subject was resumed in these words :

“The mystery of the accident in ——
“Square thickens. The sufferer is restored
“to consciousness: he is perfectly compe-
“tent to hear and understand what is said
“to him, and is able to articulate, but not

“ very plainly, and only for a moment or
“ so at a time. The authorities at the
“ hospital anticipated as we did that, on
“ the patient’s regaining his senses, some
“ information of the manner in which the
“ terrible accident from which he is suffering
“ was caused, would be obtained from him.
“ But, to the astonishment of every one,
“ he positively refuses to answer any ques-
“ tions as to the circumstances under which
“ his frightful injuries were inflicted. With
“ the same unaccountable secrecy, he declines
“ to tell his name, his place of abode, or
“ the names of any friends to whom notice
“ of his situation might be communicated.
“ It is quite in vain to press him for any
“ reason for this extraordinary course of
“ conduct—he appears to be a man of very
“ unusual firmness of character; and his
“ refusal to explain himself in any way, is
“ evidently no mere caprice of the moment.

“ All this leads to the conjecture that the
“ injuries he has sustained were inflicted on
“ him from some motive of private ven-
“ geance ; and that certain persons are
“ concerned in this disgraceful affair, whom
“ he is unwilling to expose to public odium,
“ for some secret reason which it is im-
“ possible to guess at. We understand that
“ he bears the severe pain consequent upon
“ his situation, in such a manner as to as-
“ tonish every person about him—no agony
“ draws from him a word or a sigh. He
“ displayed no emotion even when the sur-
“ geons informed him that the sight of one
“ of his eyes was hopelessly destroyed ; and
“ merely asked to be supplied with writing
“ materials as soon as he could see to use
“ them, when he was told that the sight
“ of the other would be saved. He further
“ added, we are informed, that he was in
“ a position to reward the hospital autho-

“ties for any trouble he gave, by making
“a present to the funds of the charity,
“as soon as he should be discharged as
“cured. His coolness in the midst of
“sufferings which would deprive most other
“men of all power of thinking or speaking,
“is as remarkable as his unflinching secrecy
“—a secrecy which, for the present at least,
“we cannot hope to penetrate.”

I closed the newspaper. Even then, a vague forewarning of what Mannion's inexplicable reserve boded towards me, crossed my mind. Judging by my own experience of the satanic cunning and patience which forbade all hope of sounding the depths of evil in that evil heart, I could infer enough from what I had just read to assure me that there was yet more difficulty, danger, and horror to be faced, than I had hitherto confronted. The slough of degradation and

misery into which I had fallen, had its worst perils yet in store for me.

As I became impressed by this conviction, the enervating remembrance of the wickedness to which I had been sacrificed, grew weaker in its influence over me; the bitter tears that I had shed in secret for so many days past, dried sternly at their sources; and I felt the power to endure and to resist coming back to me with my sense of the coming strife. On leaving the library, I ascended again to my own room; desiring, before I discovered more about Mannion, to discover something about his accomplice—the woman who had still the right—before men—of calling herself my wife! In a basket on my table lay several letters, still unopened, which had arrived for me during my illness. Hitherto, I had neither had the heart, nor the care to read them—now, I was ready for the task. There

were two, which I at once recognised, in hastily turning over the collection, as all-important in assisting the search on which I was now bent. The addresses of both these letters were in Mr. Sherwin's handwriting. The first that I opened, was dated nearly a month back, and ran thus:

“ North Villa, Hollyoake Square.

“ Dear Sir,

“ With agonised feelings which no one but a parent, and I will add, an affectionate parent, can possibly form an idea of, I address you on the subject of the nefarious and most shocking act of atrocity committed by that perjured villain, Mannion. You will find that I, and my innocent and unhappy daughter, have been, like you, victims of the most devilish deceit that ever was practised on respectable and unsuspecting people.

“ Let me ask you, Sir, to imagine the state of my feelings on the night of that most unfortunate party, when I saw my beloved Margaret, instead of coming home quietly as usual, rush into the room in a state bordering on distraction, with a tale the most horrible that ever was addressed to a father’s ears. That infamous Mannion, taking advantage of her innocence and confidence—of all our innocences and confidences, I may say—lured my unsuspecting child into some hotel; and there, while she was in his power, had the impudence to make the most immoral proposals to her. My dear Margaret showed a virtuous courage beyond her years. She denounced the wretch, I am happy to say, with an indignation which absolutely frightened him, and which was the natural result of the pious principles and the moral bringing-up which I have given her from

her cradle. Need I say what was the upshot? Virtue triumphed as virtue always does, and the villain slipped away in confusion and left her to herself. It was when she was approaching the door-step to fly to the bosom of her home that, I am given to understand, you, by a most remarkable accident met her. As a man of the world, you will easily conceive what must have been the feelings of a young female, under such peculiar and shocking circumstances. Besides this, your manner, as I am informed, was so terrifying and extraordinary, and my poor Margaret felt so strongly that deceitful appearances might be against her, that she lost all heart, and fled at once, as I said before, to the bosom of her home. She is still a child in purity and innocence; and she acted like a child—poor, dear thing!—on this very lamentable occasion.

“She is still in a very nervous and unhappy state: she fears that you may be too ready to believe in appearances; but I know better. Her explanation will be enough for you, as it was for me. We may have our little differences on minor topics, but we have both the same manly confidence, I am sure—you in your wife, and me in my daughter.

“I called at your worthy father’s mansion, to have a fuller explanation with you than I can give here, the morning after this to-all-parties-most-distressing-occurrence happened; and was then informed of your serious illness, for which pray accept my best condolences. The next thing I thought of doing was to write to your respected father requesting a private interview. But on maturer consideration, I thought it perhaps slightly injudicious to take such a step, while you, as the principal party con-

cerned, were ill in bed, and not able to come forward and back me. It was very possible that my telling our little secret about the marriage, as a perfect stranger, might produce some unpleasantness on both sides, which it would be rather difficult to get over—especially after what you have said to me, on some occasions, about your honoured father's feelings, and so on. I was anxious, you will observe, to act for your interests, as well as the interests of my darling girl—of course, knowing at the same time that I had the marriage certificate in my possession, if needed as a proof, and supposing I was driven to extremities and obliged to take my own course in the matter. But, as I said before, I have a fatherly and friendly confidence in your feeling as convinced of the spotless innocence of my child as I do. So will write no more on this head.

“Having determined, as best under all circumstances, to wait till your illness was over, I have kept my dear Margaret in strict retirement at home (which, as she is your wife, you will acknowledge I had no obligation to do), until you were well enough to come forward and do her justice before her family and your’s. I have not omitted to make almost daily inquiries after you, up to the time of penning these lines, and shall continue so to do until your convalescence, which I sincerely hope may be speedily at hand. I am unfortunately obliged to ask that our first interview, when you are able to see me and my daughter, may not take place at North Villa, but at some other place, any you like to fix on. The fact is, my wife, whose wretched health has been a trouble and annoyance to us for years past, has now, I grieve to say, under pressure of this sad

misfortune, quite lost her reason. She goes on in a way about this horrible villainy of Mannion's, and Margaret's providential escape from it, which is quite indescribable — indeed, so truly shocking and unnatural that I cannot mention it. I am sorry to say that she would be quite capable of interrupting us here, in a most undesirable manner to all parties, and therefore request that our first happy meeting may not take place at my house.

“ Trusting that this letter will quite remove all unpleasant feelings from your mind, and that I shall hear from you soon, on your much-to-be-desired recovery,

“ I remain, dear Sir,

“ Your faithful, obedient servant,

“ STEPHEN SHERWIN.

“ P.S. — I have not been able to find out where that scoundrel, Mannion, has

betaken himself to ; but if you should know, or suspect, I wish to tell you, as a proof that my indignation at his villainy is as great as your's, that I am ready and anxious to pursue him with the utmost rigour of the law, if law can only reach him—paying out of my own pocket all expenses of punishing him and breaking him for the rest of his life, if I go through every court in the country to do it !—S. S.”

Hurriedly as I read over this wretched and revolting letter, I detected immediately how the new plot had been framed to keep me still deceived ; to heap wrong after wrong on me with the same impunity. She knew not that I had followed her into the house, and had heard all from her voice and Mannion's — she believed that I was still ignorant of everything, until we met at the door-step ; and in this conviction she had

forged the miserable lie which her father's hand had written down. Did he really believe it, or was he writing as her accomplice ? It was not worth while to inquire : the worst and darkest discovery which it concerned me to make, had already proclaimed itself—she was a liar and a hypocrite to the very last !

And it was this woman's lightest glance which had once been to me as the star that my life looked to ! — it was for this woman that I had practised a deceit on my family which it now revolted me to think of ; had braved whatever my father's anger might inflict ; had risked cheerfully the loss of all that birth and fortune could bestow ! I groaned in the anguish of my shame, in the bitterness of my despair, as I thought of it. Why had I ever risen from my weary bed of sickness ? — it would have been better, far better, that I had died !

But, while life remained, life had its trials and its toils from which it was alike criminal and useless to shrink. There was still another letter to be opened: there was yet more wickedness which I must know how to confront.

The second of Mr. Sherwin's letters was much shorter than the first, and had apparently been written not more than a day or two back. His tone was changed; he truckled to me no longer—he began to threaten. I was reminded that the servant's report pronounced me to have been convalescent for several days past; and was asked why, under these circumstances, I had never even written. I was warned that my silence had been construed greatly to my disadvantage; and that if it continued longer, the writer would assert his daughter's cause loudly and publicly, not to my father only, but to all the world. The letter ended

by insultingly according to me three days more of grace, before the fullest disclosure would be made.

For a moment, my indignation got the better of me. I rose, to go that instant to North Villa and unmask the wretches who still thought to make their market of me as easily as ever. But the mere momentary delay caused by opening the door of my room, restored me to myself. I felt that my first duty, my paramount obligation, was to confess all to my father immediately; to know and accept my future position in my own home, before I went out from it to denounce others. I returned to the table, and gathered up the letters scattered on it. My heart beat quick, my head felt confused; but I was resolute in my determination to tell my father, at all hazards, the tale of degradation which I have told in these pages.

I waited in the stillness and loneliness, until it grew nearly dark. The servant brought in candles. Why could I not ask him whether my father and Clara had come home yet? Was I faltering in my resolution already?

Shortly after this, I heard a step on the stairs and a knock at my door.—My father? No! Clara. I tried to speak to her unconcernedly, when she came in.

“Why! you have been walking till it is quite dark, Clara.”

“We have only been in the garden of the Square—neither papa, nor I, noticed how late it was. We were talking on a subject of the deepest interest to us both.”

She paused a moment, and looked down: then hurriedly came nearer to me, and drew a chair to my side. There was a strange expression of sadness and anxiety in her face, as she continued:

“Can’t you imagine what the subject was? It was *you*, Basil. Papa is coming here directly, to speak to you. Before that, I just wished to say—to ask you to—”

She stopped once more. Her cheeks reddened a little, and she mechanically busied herself in arranging some books that lay on the table. Suddenly, she abandoned this employment—the colour left her face—it was quite pale when she addressed me again, speaking in very altered tones—so altered that I hardly recognised them as her’s.

“You know, Basil, that for a long, long time past you have kept some great secret from us; and you promised that I should know it first—but I—I have changed my mind; I have no wish to know it, dear: I would rather we never said anything about it.” (She coloured and hesitated a little again; then proceeded quickly and earnestly:) “But I hope you will tell it all to papa:

he is coming here to ask you—dear, dear Basil! be candid with him, and tell him everything; let us all be to one another what we were before this time last year! You have nothing to fear, if you will only speak openly and freely; for I have begged him to be gentle and forgiving with you, and you know he refuses me nothing. I only came here to prepare you; to beg you to be candid and patient—hush! there is a step on the stairs: speak out, Basil, for *my* sake—pray, pray speak out; and then leave the rest to me!"

She hurriedly left the room. The next minute my father entered it.

Perhaps my guilty conscience deceived me; but I thought he looked on me more sadly and severely than I had ever seen him look before. His voice too was troubled when he spoke. This was a change, which meant much in *him*.

"I have come to speak to you, Basil," said he, "on a subject about which I had much rather you had spoken to me first."

"I think, Sir, I know to what subject you refer—I—"

"I must beg you will listen to me as patiently as you can," he rejoined, "I have not much to say."

He paused, and sighed heavily. I thought he looked at me more kindly. My heart grew very sad; and I yearned to throw my arms round his neck—to give freedom to the repressed tears which half choked me—to weep out on his bosom my confession that I was no more worthy to be called his son. Oh, that I had obeyed the impulse which moved me to do this! Oh, that we could always listen when the angel-voice whispers within us, as MARY listened before the angel-presence!

"Basil," pursued my father, gravely and

sadly, “ I hope, and believe, that I have little to reproach myself with in my conduct towards you. I think I am justified in saying, that very few fathers would have acted towards a son, as I have acted for the last year or more. I may often have grieved over the sinister secrecy which has estranged you from us—I may even have shown you by my manner, that I resented it—but I have never used my authority to force you into the explanation of your conduct, which you have been so uniformly unwilling to volunteer. I rested upon that implicit faith in the honour and integrity of my son, which I will not yet believe to have been ill-placed, but which I fear has led me to neglect too long the duty of inquiry which I owed to your own well-being and to my position towards you. I am now here to atone for this omission—circumstances have left me no choice. Basil ! it deeply concerns

my interest as a father, and my honour as the head of our family to know what heavy misfortune it was (I can imagine it to be nothing else) that stretched my son senseless in the open street, and afflicted him afterwards with an illness which threatened his reason and his life. You are now sufficiently recovered to reveal this; and I only use the authority which God has given me over my own children, when I tell you that I must now know all, that I *must* hear the whole truth, no matter how humiliating to *you*, or how afflicting to *me*. If you still refuse, the relations between us must henceforth change for life."

"I do not refuse, Sir—I only ask you to believe beforehand, that if I have sinned grievously against you, I have been already heavily and fatally punished for the sin. I am afraid it is impossible that your

worst forebodings can have prepared you for—for—”

“And yet, the words you spoke in your delirium, words which I heard but will not judge you by, justified the saddest and the worst forebodings.”

“My illness has spared me the hardest part of a hard trial, Sir, if it has prepared you for what I have to confess—if you suspect—”

“I do not *suspect*—I feel but too *sure*, that you, my second son, from whom I had expected far better things, have imitated in secret—I am afraid, outstripped—the worst vices of your elder brother.”

“My brother!—my brother’s faults mine!—Ralph!—”

“Yes: Ralph. It is my last hope that you will now imitate Ralph’s candour. Take example from that best part of him,

as you have already taken example from the worst."

My heart grew faint and cold as he spoke. Ralph's example ! Ralph's vices !—vices of the reckless hour, or the idle day !—vices whose stain, in the world's eye, was not a stain for life !—convenient, reclaimable vices, that men were mercifully unwilling to associate with grinning infamy and irreparable disgrace ! How far—how fearfully far—my father was from the remotest suspicion of what had really happened ! I tried to answer his last words ; but the apprehension of the life-long humiliation and grief which my confession might inflict on him—absolutely incapable as he appeared to be of foreboding even the least degrading part of it—kept me speechless. When he resumed, after a momentary silence, his tones were stern, his looks searching—pitilessly searching, and bent full upon my face.

“A person has been calling, named Sherwin”—he said—“and inquiring about you every day. What intimate connection between you authorises this perfect stranger to *me* to come to the house as frequently as he does, and to make his inquiries with a familiarity of tone and manner which has struck every one of the servants who have, on different occasions opened the door to him? Who is this Mr. Sherwin?”

“He is—he—it is not with him, Sir, that I can well begin. I must—I must go back to—”

“You must go back farther, I am afraid, than you will be able to return. You must go back to the time when you had nothing to conceal from me, and could speak to me with the frankness and directness of a gentleman!”

“Pray be patient with me, Sir!—give me a few minutes to collect myself. I

have much need for a little self-possession before I tell you all."

"All—*all*? Your tones mean more than your words—*they* are candid, at least! Have I feared the worst, and yet not feared as I ought? Basil!—do you hear me, Basil? You are trembling very strangely; you are getting pale!"

"I shall be better directly, Sir. I am afraid I am not quite so strong yet as I thought myself—Father! I am heart-broken and spirit-broken: be patient and kind to me, or I cannot speak to you!"

I thought I saw his eyes moisten. He shaded them a moment with his hand, and sighed again—the same long, trembling sigh that I had heard before. I tried to rise from my chair, and throw myself on my knees at his feet. He mistook the action, and caught me by the arm, believing that I was fainting.

“No more to-night, Basil”—he said, hurriedly, but very gently—“no more on this subject till to-morrow.”

“I can speak now, Sir—it is better to speak at once.”

“No: you are too much agitated; you are weaker than I thought. To-morrow, in the morning, when you are stronger after a night’s rest. No! I will hear nothing more. Go to bed now—I will tell your sister not to disturb you to-night. To-morrow, you shall speak to me; and speak in your own way, without interruption or hurrying. Good-night, Basil—good-night.”

Without waiting to shake hands with me, he hastened to the door, as if anxious to hide from my observation the grief and apprehension which had evidently overcome him. But, just at the moment when he was leaving the room, he hesitated—turned

round—looked sorrowfully on me for an instant—and then, retracing his steps, gave me his hand—pressed mine for a moment in silence—and left me.

After the morrow was over, would he ever give me that hand again ?

III.

THE morning which was to decide all between my father and me, the morning on whose event hung the future of my home life, was the brightest and loveliest that my eyes ever looked on. A cloudless sky; a soft air; sunshine so joyous and dazzling that the commonest objects looked beautiful in its light, seemed to be mocking at me for my heavy heart, as I stood at my window, and thought of the hard

duty to be fulfilled, on the harder judgment that might be pronounced, before the dawning of another day.

During the night, I had arranged no plan on which to conduct the terrible disclosure which I was now bound to make —the greatness of the emergency deprived me of all power of preparing myself for it. I thought on my father's character, on the inbred principles of honour and candour which ruled him with the stern influence of a fanaticism: I thought on his pride of caste, so unobtrusive, so rarely hinted at in words, and yet so firmly rooted in his nature, so intricately entwined with every one of his emotions, his aspirations, his simplest homeliest feelings and ideas: I thought on his almost feminine delicacy in shrinking from the barest mention of impurities which other men could carelessly discuss, or could laugh over as good material for an after-dinner jest—

I thought over all this ; and when I remembered that it was to such a man that I must confess the infamous marriage which I had contracted in secret, all hope from his fatherly affection deserted me ; all idea of appealing to his chivalrous generosity became a delusion in which it was madness to put a moment's trust.

The faculties of observation are generally sharpened, in proportion as the faculties of reflection are dulled, under the influence of an absorbing suspense. While I now waited alone in my room, the most ordinary, everyday sounds and events in the house, which I never remembered noticing before, absolutely enthralled me. It seemed as if the noise of a footstep, the echo of a voice, the shutting or opening of doors down stairs, must, on this momentous day, presage some mysterious calamity, some strange discovery, some secret project formed against me, I

knew not how or by whom. Two or three times I found myself listening intently on the staircase — with what object I could hardly tell. It was always, however, on those occasions that a dread, significant quiet appeared to have fallen suddenly on the house. Clara never came to me; no message arrived from my father; the door-bell seemed strangely silent, the servants strangely neglectful of their duties above stairs. I caught myself returning to my own room softly, as if I expected that some hidden catastrophe might break forth, if the sound of my footsteps were heard. For a long year past, the cloud had been over our household: it was at its darkest and thickest to-day: to-day, when it was at length to be dispersed—alas! not by the sunshine, but by the storm!

Would my father seek me again in my own room, or would he send for me down

stairs? It was not long before the doubt was decided. One of the servants knocked at my door—the servant whose special duty it had been to wait on me in my illness. I longed to take the man's hand, and implore his sympathy and encouragement while he addressed me.

“ My master, Sir, desires me to say that, if you feel well enough, he wishes to see you in his own room.”

I rose, and immediately followed the servant. On our way, we passed the door of Clara's private sitting-room—it opened, and my sister came out and laid her hand on my arm. She smiled as I looked at her; but the tears stood thick in her eyes, and her face was deadly pale.

“ Think of what I said last night, Basil”—she whispered—“ and, if hard words are spoken to you, think of *me*. All that our mother would have done for you this

day, if she had been still among us, *I* will do. Remember that, dear ; and keep heart and hope to the very last."

She hastily returned to her room, and I went on down stairs. In the hall, the servant was waiting for me, with a letter in his hand.

" This was left for you, Sir, a little while ago. The messenger who brought it said he was not to wait for an answer."

It was no time for reading letters—the interview with my father was too close at hand. I hastily put the letter into my pocket ; barely noticing, as I did so, that the handwriting on the address was very irregular, and quite unknown to me.

Then, I went at once into my father's room.

He was sitting at his table, cutting the leaves of some new books that lay on it. Pointing to a chair placed opposite to him,

he briefly inquired after my health ; and then added in a lower tone :

“ Take any time you like, Basil, to compose and collect yourself. This morning, my time is yours.”

He turned a little away from me, and went on cutting the leaves of the books placed before him. Still utterly incapable of preparing myself in any way for the disclosure expected from me ; chilled all over, even under the warm summer air that fluttered in happily through the open window ; without thought, or hope, or feeling of any kind, except a vague sense of thankfulness for the reprieve granted me before I was called on to speak—I mechanically looked round and round the room, as if I expected to see the sentence to be pronounced against me, already written on the walls, or grimly foreshadowed in the faces of the old family portraits which hung above the fire-place.

What man has ever felt that all his thinking powers were absorbed, even by the most poignant mental misery that could occupy them? In moments of imminent danger, the mind can still travel of its own accord over the past, in spite of the present—in moments of bitter affliction, it can still recur to everyday trifles, in spite of ourselves. While I now sat silent in my father's room, long-forgotten associations of childhood connected with different parts of it, began to rise on my memory in the strangest and most startling independence of any influence or control, which my agitation and suspense of the present might be supposed to exercise over them. The remembrances that should have been the last to be awakened at this time of heavy trial, were the very remembrances which now moved within me.

With burdened heart and aching eyes I

looked over the walls around me. There, in that corner, was the red cloth door which led to the library. As children, how often Ralph and I had peeped curiously through that very door, to see what my father was about in his study, to wonder why he had so many letters to write, and so many books to read. How frightened we both were, when he discovered us one day, and reproved us severely ! How happy the moment afterwards, when we had begged him to pardon us, and were sent back to the library again with a great picture-book to look at, as a token that we were both forgiven ! Then, again, there was the high, old-fashioned, mahogany press before the window, with the same large illustrated folio about Jewish antiquities lying on it, which, years and years ago, Clara and I were sometimes allowed to look at, as a special treat,

on Sunday afternoons ; and which we always examined and re-examined with never-ending delight—standing together on two chairs to reach up to the thick, yellow-looking leaves, and turn them over with our own hands. And, there, in the recess between two book-cases, still stood the ancient desk-table, with its rows of little inlaid drawers ; and on the bracket above it the old French clock, which had once belonged to my mother, and which always chimed the hours so sweetly and merrily. It was at that table that Ralph and I always bade my father farewell, when we were going back to school after the holidays, and were receiving our allowance of pocket-money, given to us out of one of the tiny inlaid drawers, just before we started. Near that spot, too, Clara—then a little rosy child—used to wait gravely and anxiously, with her doll in her arms, to say Good-by for the last time ; and to bid us come

back soon, and then never go away again
—“never, never more.”

I turned, and looked abruptly towards the window ; for such memories as the room suggested were more than I could bear. Outside, in the dreary strip of garden, the few stunted, dusky trees were now rustling as pleasantly in the air, as if the breeze that stirred them came serenely over an open meadow, or swept freshly under their branches from the rippling surface of a brook. Distant, but yet well within hearing, the mighty murmur from a large thoroughfare—the great mid-day voice of London—swelled grandly and joyously on the ear. While, nearer still, in a street that ran past the side of the house, the notes of an organ rang out shrill and fast : the instrument was playing its liveliest polka tune—a tune which I had danced to in the ball-room, over and over again. What mocking memories within,

what mocking sounds without, to herald and accompany such a confession as I had now to make !

Minute after minute glided on, inexorably fast ; and yet I never broke silence. My eyes turned anxiously and slowly on my father. He was still looking away from me, still cutting the leaves of the books before him. Even in that trifling action, the strong emotions which he was trying to conceal, were plainly and terribly betrayed. His hand, usually so steady and careful, trembled perceptibly ; and the paper-knife tore through the leaves faster and faster—cutting them awry ; rending them one from another, so as to spoil the appearance of every page. I believe he *felt* that I was looking at him ; for he suddenly discontinued his employment, turned round towards me, and spoke :

“ I have resolved to give you your own time,” said he, “ and from that resolve

I have no wish to depart—I only ask you to remember that every minute of delay adds to the suffering and suspense that I am enduring on your account.” He opened the books before him again, adding in lower and colder tones, as he did so: “In *your* place, Ralph would have spoken before this.”

Ralph, and Ralph’s example quoted to me again!—I could remain silent no longer.

“My brother’s faults towards you, and towards his family, are not such faults as mine, Sir,” I began, “I have *not* imitated his vices; I have acted as he would *not* have acted—and yet, the result of my error will appear far more irremediable, far more humiliating, and even disgraceful, in your eyes, than the results of any errors of Ralph’s.”

As I pronounced the word “disgraceful,” he suddenly looked me full in the face. His eyes lightened up sternly; and the warning red spot rose darkly on his pale cheeks.

“ What do you mean by ‘disgraceful?’ ”—he asked abruptly—“ what do you mean by associating such a word as *disgrace* with your conduct—with the conduct of a son of mine ? ”

“ I must reply to your question indirectly, Sir,” I continued. “ You asked me, last night, who the Mr. Sherwin was who has called here so often—”

“ And this morning I ask it again. I have other questions to put to you, besides—you called constantly on a woman’s name in your delirium ; you—but I will repeat last night’s question first : who is Mr. Sherwin ? ”

“ He lives at—”

“ I don’t ask where he lives — who is he ? What is he ? ”

“ Mr. Sherwin is a linen-draper in Oxford Street.”

“ You owe him money ? —you have

borrowed money of him ? Be silent, Sir : your phrase-making will not avail you with *me*. Why did you not tell me this before ? You have degraded my house by letting a man call at the door—I know it!—in the character of a dun. He has inquired about you as his ‘friend,’—the servants told me of it. This money-lending tradesman, your ‘*friend* !’ If I had heard that the poorest labourer on my land called you ‘friend,’ I should have held you honoured by the attachment and gratitude of an honest man. When I hear that name given to you by a tradesman and money-lender, I hold you contaminated by connection with a cheat. You were right, Sir !—this *is* disgrace—how much do you owe ? Where are your dis- honoured acceptances ? Where have you used *my* name and *my* credit ? Tell me at once,—I insist on it !”

He spoke rapidly and contemptuously ;

and rising from his chair as he ended, walked impatiently up and down the room.

“ I owe no money to Mr. Sherwin, Sir—no money to any one.”

He stopped suddenly :

“ No money to any one ! ”he repeated very slowly, and in very altered tones. “ You spoke of disgrace just now. There is a worse disgrace then, that your secrecy has hidden from me, than debts dishonourably contracted ? ”

At this moment, a step passed across the hall. He instantly turned round, and locked the door on that side of the room—then continued :

“ Speak, Sir ! and speak honestly, if you can. How have you been deceiving me ? A woman’s name escaped you constantly, when your delirium was at its worst : you used some very strange expressions about her, which it was impossible altogether to

unreformed—but you said enough to show that her character was one of the most abandoned, that her licentiousness—it is too revolting to speak of *her*! I return to you. I trust to knowing how far your vices have compromised you with that vicious crew."

"She has ~~wrecked~~ me—cruelly, horribly—~~wronged~~ me—she—"

I could say no more: my head drooped with shame: my shame overpowered me.

"Who is she? You called her Mar—
garet—what does—what is she?"

"She is Mr. Steevens's daughter, and—" The words that I would fain have spoken succeeded to suffocate me. I was silent again.

I turned my thoughts to himself:

"The man's daughter!—a worse bait
over the net of money!"

Then he bent forward and looked on

me searchingly. A frightful paleness flew over his face in an instant.

“ Basil !” he cried, in accents almost of terror, “ in God’s name, answer me at once ! What is Mr. Sherwin’s daughter to *you* ?”

“ She is *my wife* !”

I heard no answer — not a word, not even a sigh. My eyes were blinded with tears ; my face was bent down ; I saw nothing at first. When I raised my head, and dashed away the blinding tears, and looked up, the blood chilled at my heart.

My father was leaning against one of the book-cases, with both his hands clasped over his breast. His head was drawn back, his white lips moved, but no sound came from them. Over his upturned face there had passed a ghastly change, as indescribable in its awfulness as the change of death.

I ran horror-stricken to his side, and attempted to take his hand. My touch seemed to thrill through him like fire. He started instantly into an erect position, and thrust me from him furiously, without uttering a word. At that fearful moment, in that fearful silence, the sounds out of doors penetrated with harrowing distinctness and merriment into the room. The pleasant rustling of the trees mingled musically with the softened, monotonous rolling of carriages in the distant street; while the organ-tune, now changed to the lively measure of a waltz, rang out clear and cheerful above both: the dancing, merry notes poured into the room as lightly and happily as the very sunshine itself!

For a few minutes we stood apart; and neither of us moved or spoke. Then, I saw him take out his handkerchief, and pass it over his face; breathing heavily and

thickly, and leaning against the book-case once more. When he withdrew the handkerchief and looked at me again, I knew that the sharp pang of agony had passed away, that the last hard struggle between his parental affection and his family pride was over, and that the great gulph which was henceforth to separate father and son had now opened between us for ever.

He pointed peremptorily to me to go back to my former place; but did not return to his own chair. As I obeyed, I saw him unlock the door of the book-case against which he had been leaning, and place his hand on one of the books inside. Without withdrawing it from its place; without turning or looking towards me, he asked if I had anything more to say to him.

The terrible calmness of his tones; the question itself, and the time at which he put it; the unnatural repression of a single word

of rebuke, of passion, or of sorrow, after such a confession as I had just made, struck me speechless. He turned a little away from the book-case—still keeping his hand on the book inside—and repeated the question. His eyes, when they met mine, had a pining weary look, as if they had been long condemned to rest on woeful and revolting objects ; his expression had lost its natural refinement, its gentleness of repose ; and had assumed a hard, lowering calmness, under which his whole countenance appeared to have shrunk and changed—years of old age seemed to have fallen on it, since I had spoken the last fatal words !

“ Have you anything more to say to me ? ”

On the repetition of that terrible question, I sank down in the chair at my side, and hid my face in my hands. Unconscious how I spoke, or why I spoke ; with no hope in myself, or in him ; with no motive but to

invite and bear the whole penalty of my disgrace, I now disclosed the miserable story of my marriage, and of all that followed it. I remember nothing of the words I used — nothing of what I urged in my own defence. The sense of bewilderment and oppression grew heavier and heavier on my brain ; I spoke more and more rapidly, confusedly, unconsciously, until I was again silenced and recalled to myself by the sound of my father's voice. I believe I had arrived at the last, worst part of my confession when he interrupted me.

“ Spare me any more details,” he said, bitterly and quickly ; “ you have humiliated me sufficiently—you have spoken enough.”

He removed the book on which his hand had hitherto rested from the case behind him, and advanced with it to the table—paused for a moment, pale and silent, then

slowly opened it at the first page ; and resumed his chair.

I recognized the book instantly. It was a biographical history of his family, from the time of his earliest ancestors down to the date of the births of his own children. The thick, quarto pages were beautifully illuminated in the manner of the ancient manuscripts ; and the narrative, in written characters, had been produced under his own inspection. This book had cost him years of research and perseverance. The births and deaths, the marriages and possessions, the battle achievements and private feuds of the old Norman Barons from whom he traced his descent, were all enrolled in regular order on every leaf—headed, sometimes merely by representations of the Knight's favourite weapon ; sometimes by copies of the Baron's effigy on his tomb-stone in a foreign land. As the history advanced to

later dates, beautiful miniature portraits were inlaid at the top of each leaf; and the illuminations were so managed as to symbolize the remarkable merits, or the peculiar tastes of the subject of each biography. Thus, the page devoted to my mother was surrounded by her favourite violets, clustering thickest round the last melancholy lines of writing which told the story of her death.

Slowly and in silence, my father turned over the leaves of the book which, next to the Bible, I believe he most reverenced in the world, until he came to the last written page but one—the page which I knew, from its position, to be occupied by my name. At the top, a miniature portrait of me, when a child, was let into the leaf. Under it was the record of my birth and names, of the School and College at which I had been taught, and of the profession that I had adopted. Below, a large blank

space was left for the entry of future particulars. On this page my father now looked, still not uttering a word, still with the same ghastly calmness on his face. The organ-notes sounded no more; but the trees rustled on pleasantly, and the roar of the distant carriages swelled as joyously as ever on the ear. Some children had come out to play in the garden of a neighbouring house. As their voices reached us, so fresh, and clear, and happy—but another modulation of the thanksgiving song to God which the trees were singing in the summer air—I saw my father, while he still looked on the page before him, clasp his trembling hands over my portrait so as to hide it from sight.

Then he spoke; but without looking up, and more as if he were speaking to himself than to me. His voice, at other times so clear and yet so gentle in its tones, was

now so hard and harsh in its forced calmness and deliberation of utterance, that it sounded like a stranger's.

“I came here, this morning,” he began, “prepared for much grief and misery, prepared to hear of faults and misfortunes which should pain me to the heart; which I might never afterwards, perhaps, be able to forget, however willing and even pre-determined to forgive—but I did *not* come prepared to hear, that unspeakable disgrace had been cast on me and mine, by my own child; and that the advantage taken of the confidence which it was once my pride to feel, was a criminal advantage of the basest and falsest kind. I have no words of rebuke or of condemnation for this: the reproach and the punishment have fallen already where the guilt was—and not there only. My son's infamy defiles his brother's birthright, and puts his father to shame:

even his sister's pure name may now be coupled with—”

He stopped, shuddering. When he proceeded, his voice faltered, and his head drooped low.

“I say it again:—you have sunk beneath all reproach and all condemnation; but, I have a duty to perform towards my two children who are absent, and I have a last word to say to *you* when that duty is done. On this page—” (as he pointed to the family history, his tones strengthened again; and a strange, shadowy darkness seemed to move over his face)—“on this page, there was a blank space left, after the last entry, for writing the future events of your life: here, then, if I still acknowledge you to be my son; if I think your presence and the presence of my daughter possible in the same house, must be written such a record of dishonour and degradation

as has never yet, through the lapse of centuries, defiled a single page of this book —here, the foul stain of your marriage and its consequences, must be admitted to spread over all that is pure before it, and to taint to the last whatever comes after. This shall not be. I have no faith or hope in you more. I know you now, only as an enemy to me and to my house—it is mockery and hypocrisy to call you son; it is an insult to Clara, and even to Ralph, to think of you as my child. In this record your place is destroyed—and destroyed for ever. Would to God I could tear the past from my memory, as I can tear the leaf from this book!"

As he spoke, the hour struck; and the old French clock rang out gaily the same little silvery chime which my mother had so often taken me into her room to listen to, in the byegone, the long byegone time. The

shrill, lively peal mingled awfully with the sharp, tearing sound, as my father rent out from the book before him the whole of the leaf which contained my name ; tore it into fragments, and cast them on the floor.

He rose abruptly, after he had closed the book again. His cheeks flushed once more ; and when he next spoke, his voice grew louder and louder with every word he uttered. It seemed as if he still distrusted his resolution to abandon me ; and sought, in his anger, the strength of purpose which, in his calmer mood, he might even yet have been unable to collect against me.

“ Now, Sir,” said he, “ we treat together as strangers. You are Mr. Sherwin’s son—not mine. You are the husband of his daughter—not a relation of my family. Rise, Sir, as I do : we sit together no longer in the same room. Write !” (he pushed pen, ink, and paper before me), “ write your terms

ll find means to keep you
rement—the terms of your
n this country; and of
silence, and of the
of all of them.
ready to pay
secrecy, and
ne name you have
od! that I should live
or hushing up the dishonour
family, and to bargain for it with
u."

Hopeless and humiliated, I had listened
to him hitherto without pleading a word
in my own behalf; but his last speech
roused me. Some of *his* pride stirred within
my heart against the bitterness of his con-
tempt. I raised my head, and met his eye
steadily for the first time—then, thrust the
writing materials away from me, and left my
place at the table.

“ Stop!” he cried. “ You shall not go yet—do you pretend that you have not understood me?”

“ It is *because* I have understood you, Sir, that I go. I have deserved your anger, and have submitted without a murmur to all that it could inflict. But I cannot forget that, though misery and humiliation may have fallen on me as a punishment, my punishment is heavier than I have deserved—even though I have acted deceitfully towards *you*, and have forgotten what was due to the position of your family. But towards *her*, Sir, I acted honourably and purely. If I had no right to expect you to see this as some mitigation of my offence; or to view the shame and wrong inflicted on me with such grief as might have some pity mixed with it—I had, I think, the right to hope that your contempt might be silent, and your last words to me, not words of insult.”

“ Insult ! After what has happened, is it for *you* to utter that word in the tone in which you have just spoken it ? I tell you again, I insist on your written engagement, as I would insist on the engagement of a stranger whom I suspected—I will have it, before you leave this room !”

“ All, Sir, and more than all, which that degrading engagement could imply, I will do. Disowned though I am, I still hold the honour of your family as dear as you can hold it ; and I will yet show you that I can keep your name as clear from the infection of my dishonour, as you could keep it. But this must be done by my own free act, at my own sole sacrifice ; by giving up all to the effort, by accepting nothing for it. I have not fallen so low yet, as to be bribed to do a duty. You may be able to forget that you are my father ; I can never forget that I am your son.”

“Forget it, or not, the remembrance will avail you nothing as long as I live. I tell you again, I insist on your written engagement, though it were only to show that I have ceased to believe in your word. Write at once, Sir—do you hear me?—Write!”

I neither moved nor answered. His face changed again, and grew livid; his fingers trembled convulsively, and crumpled the sheet of paper, as he tried to take it up from the table on which it lay.

“You refuse!”—he said quickly.

“I have already told you, Sir—”

“Go!”—he interrupted, pointing passionately to the door—“Go out from this house, never to return to it again—go out, not as a stranger to me, but as an enemy! I have no faith in a single promise you have made: there is no baseness which I do not believe you will yet be guilty of—but I tell you, and the wretches with whom you are leagued,

to take warning: I have wealth, power, and position; and there is no use to which I will not put them against the man or woman who threatens the fair fame of this family. Leave me, remembering that—and leave me for ever!"

Just as he uttered the last word, just as my hand was on the lock of the door, a faint sound—something between breathing and speaking—was audible in the direction of the library. He started, and looked round. Impelled I know not how, I paused on the point of going out. My eyes followed his, and fixed on the cloth door which led into the library.

It opened a little—then shut again—then opened wide. Slowly and noiselessly, Clara came into the room.

The silence and suddenness of her entrance at such a moment; the rigid expres-

sion of her features ; the look of terror, which changed to unnatural vacancy the wonted softness and gentleness of her eyes ; her pale face ; her white dress, and slow, noiseless step, made her first appearance in the room seem almost supernatural—it was as if an apparition had been walking towards us, and not Clara herself ! As she approached my father, he pronounced her name in astonishment ; but his voice sank to a whisper, while he spoke it. For an instant, she paused, hesitating—I saw her tremble as her eyes met his—then, as they turned towards me, the brave girl came on ; and, taking my hand, stood and faced my father, standing by my side.

“ Clara !” he exclaimed again, still in the same whispering tones.

I felt her cold hand close fast on mine : the grasp of the chill, frail fingers was almost

painful to me. Her lips moved ; but her quick, hysterical breathing made the few words she uttered inarticulate.

“Clara !” repeated my father, for the third time, his voice rising, but sinking again immediately, when he spoke further. (For, even at that moment, his old, loving, home-habit of mingling his chivalrous deference towards women, with his fatherly affection for my sister, influenced him as powerfully as ever.) “Clara,” he said, sadly and gently, “let go his hand ; this is not a time for your presence ; I beg you to leave us. You must not take his hand ! He has ceased to be my son, or your brother — Clara ! do you not hear me ?”

“Yes, Sir, I hear you,” she answered. “God grant that my mother in heaven may not hear you too !”

He was approaching while she replied ; but at her last words he stopped instantly,

and turned his face away from us. At that moment, who shall say what remembrances of other days shook him to the heart?

“ You have spoken, Clara, as you should not have spoken,” he went on, without looking up. “ Your mother—” his voice faltered and failed him. “ Can you still hold his hand after what I have said? I tell you again, he is unworthy to be in your presence; my house is his home no longer—must I *command* you to leave him?”

The deeply-planted instinct of gentleness and obedience prevailed: she dropped my hand—but did not move away from me, even yet.

“ Now leave us, Clara,” he said. “ You were wrong, my love, to be in that room, and wrong to come in here. I will speak to you up-stairs—you must remain here no longer.”

She clasped her trembling fingers together and sighed heavily.

“ I cannot go, Sir,” she said quickly and breathlessly.

“ Must I tell you, for the first time in your life, that you are acting disobediently ?” he asked.

“ I cannot go,” she repeated in the same manner, “ till you have said you will let him atone for his offence, and will forgive him.”

“ For *his* offence there is neither atonement nor forgiveness. Clara! are you so changed that you can disobey me to my face ?”

He walked away from us, as he said this.

“ Oh, no ! no !” She ran towards him ; but stopped halfway, and looked back at me affrightedly, as I stood near the door. “ Basil !” she cried, “ you have not done

what you promised me ; you have not been patient. Oh, Sir, if I have ever deserved kindness from you, be kind to him for *my* sake ! Basil ! speak, Basil ! Ask his pardon on your knees ! Father ! I promised him he should be forgiven, if I asked you. Not a word ? not a word from either ? Oh, this is too horrible ! Basil ! you are not going yet—not going at all ! Remember, Sir, how good and kind he has always been to *me* : my poor mother (I *must* speak of her), my poor mother's favourite son, you have told me so yourself ! and he has always been my favourite brother ; I think because my mother loved him so ! His first fault, too ! his first grief ! And will you tell him for this, that our home is *his* home no longer ? Punish *me*, Sir ! I have done wrong like him ; when I heard your voices so loud, I listened in the library. Basil ! oh, he's going ! No, no, no ! not yet !"

She ran to the door as I opened it, and pushed it to again. Overwhelmed by the violence of her agitation, my father had sunk into a chair while she was speaking.

“Come back — come back with me to his knees!” she whispered, fixing her wild, tearless eyes on mine, flinging her arms round my neck, and trying to lead me with her from the door. “Come back, or you will drive me mad!” she repeated loudly, drawing me away towards my father.

He rose instantly from his chair, saying :

“Clara, I command you, leave him!”— and then advanced a few steps towards me. “Go!” he cried; “if you are human in your villainy, you will release me from this!”

I whispered in her ear: “I will write, love—I will write;” and disengaged her arms from my neck—they were hanging round it weakly, already! As I passed the

door, I turned slowly, and looked again into the room for the last time.

Clara was in my father's arms ; her head lay back on his shoulder ; her face was as still and pure in its heavenly calmness, as if the world and the world's looks knew it no more, and the only light that fell on it now, was light from the angels' eyes. She had fainted.

He was standing with one arm round her ; his disengaged hand was searching impatiently over the wall behind him for the bell ; and his eyes were fixed in anguish and in love unutterable on the peaceful face, hushed in its sad and solemn repose so close beneath his own. For one moment, I saw him thus, ere I closed the door—the next, I had left the house.

I never entered it again—I have never seen my father since.

IV.

WE are seldom able to discover under any ordinary conditions of self-knowledge, how intimately that spiritual part of us, which is undying, can attach to itself and its operations the poorest objects of that external world around us, which is perishable. In the ravelled skein, the slightest threads are the hardest to follow: in analysing the associations and sympathies which regulate the play of our passions, the simplest and home-

liest are the last that we detect. It is only when the shock comes, and the mind recoils before it—when joy is changed into sorrow, or sorrow into joy—that we really discern what trifles in the outer world our noblest mental pleasures, or our severest mental pains, have made part of themselves—atoms which the whirlpool has drawn into its vortex, as greedily and as surely as the largest mass !

It was reserved for me to know something of this, when—after a moment's pause before the door of my father's house; more homeless, then, than the poorest wretch who passed me on the pavement, and had wife or kindred to shelter him in a garret that night—my steps turned, as of old, in the direction of North Villa. It was less by an exertion of my own will than by the instinct of a last duty which now remained to be fulfilled, that my course was guided, as I

walked rapidly onward through the hard brightness of a bright day in the London streets.

Again I passed over the former scene of my daily pilgrimage, always to the same shrine, for a whole year ; and now, for the first time, I knew that there was hardly a spot along the entire way, which my heart had not unconsciously made beautiful and beloved to me by some association with Margaret Sherwin. Here, was the friendly, familiar shop-window, filled with the glittering trinkets which had so often lured me in to buy presents for her, on my way to the house. There, was the noisy street-corner, void of all adornment in itself, but once bright to me with the fairy-land architecture of a dream, because I knew that at that place I had passed over half the distance which separated my home from

her's. Further on, the Park trees came in sight—trees that no autumn decay or winter nakedness could make dreary, in the bye-gone time; for she and I had walked under them together. And further yet, was the turning which led from the long, suburban road into Hollyoake Square—the lonely, dust-whitened place, about which my love-thoughts had clustered thickest; around which my past happiness and my wasted hopes had flung their golden illusions, like jewels hung round the coarse wooden image of a Roman saint. Dishonoured and ruined, it was among such associations as these—too homely to have been recognised by me in former times—that I journeyed along the well-remembered way to North Villa. Not a house in the old, familiar road which had once been the mute companion of my thoughts for so many days and nights, but

seemed to be set up as a mark of reproach or of mockery against me when I now passed it by !

Still, I went on without hesitating, without even a thought of turning back. I had said that the honour of my family should not suffer by the calamity which had fallen on me ; and, while life remained, I was determined that nothing should prevent me from holding to my word—determined that my father should live to repent of his injustice and to recall his contempt. It was from this resolution that I drew the faith in myself, the confidence in my endurance, the sustaining calmness under my father's sentence of exclusion, which nerved me to go on. And the trial that now awaited me, was, in truth, one to test the patience of the most patient heart. I must see Mr. Sherwin, (perhaps, even suffer the humiliation of seeing *her* !) must coolly speak such

words, disclose such truths, as should show him that deceit was henceforth useless, and that every equivocation in the letter he had written to me, was an insult on his part, and a blasphemy on her's—I must do this: and more, in denouncing the wickedness committed against me, I must also be prepared to guard the family to which—though banished from it—I still belonged, from every conspiracy against them that detected crime, or shameless cupidity could form, whether in the desire of revenge, or in the hope of gain. A hard, almost an impossible task—but nevertheless, a task that must be done!

I kept the thought of this stern necessity before my mind unceasingly: not only as a duty, but as a refuge from another thought, to which I dared not, for a moment, turn. The still, pale face which I had seen lying hushed on my father's breast—CLARA!—

That way, lay the grief that weakens, the yearning and the terror that are near despair: that way was not for *me*.

The servant was at the garden-gate of North Villa—the same servant whom I had seen and questioned in the first days of my fatal love. She was receiving a letter from a man, very poorly dressed, who walked away quickly the moment I approached. Her confusion and surprise were so great, as she let me in, that she could hardly look at, or speak to me. It was only when I was ascending the door-steps that she said:—

“Miss Margaret”—(she still gave her that name!)—“Miss Margaret is up-stairs, Sir. I suppose you would like—”

“I have no wish to see her: I want to speak to Mr. Sherwin.”

Looking more bewildered, and even frightened, than before, the girl hurriedly opened one of the doors in the passage. I saw, as

I entered, that she had shown me, in her confusion, into the wrong room. Mr. Sherwin, who was in the apartment, hastily drew a screen across the lower end of it—apparently, to hide something from me, which, however, I had not seen as I came in.

Then he advanced, holding out his hand; but his small, sinister eyes wandered unsteadily, looking away from me towards the screen.

“ Well ! and so you’ve come at last—have you ? Just let’s step into the drawing-room: the fact is—I thought I wrote to you about it—”

He stopped suddenly, and his outstretched arm fell to his side. I had not said a word. Something in my look and manner must have told him already on what errand I had come.

“ Why don’t you speak ?” he said, after a moment’s pause. “ What are you looking

at me like that for? Stop!—Let's say our say in the other room.” He walked past me towards the door, and half opened it.

Why was he so anxious to get me away? Who, or what, was he hiding behind the screen? The servant had said his daughter was up-stairs: remembering this, and suspecting every action or word that came from him, I determined to remain in the room, and discover his secret. It was evidently connected with me.

“Now then,” he continued, opening the door a little wider, “it's only across the hall, you know; and I always receive visitors in the best room.”

“I have been admitted here,” I replied, “and have neither time nor inclination to follow you from room to room, just as you like. What I have to say is not much; and, unless you give me fit reasons to the contrary, I shall say it here.”

“ You will—will you? Let me tell you, that’s damned like what we plain mercantile men call downright incivility. I say it again—incivility; and rudeness too, if you like it better.” He closed the door as he spoke; his face twitching and working violently, and his quick, evil eyes turned again in the direction of the screen.

(“ After all,” he muttered doggedly to himself, as he went back to his former place, “ after all, I’d better let it happen; and then the doctors and nurses can’t say anything—nobody can say I hav’nt humoured and pacified, and all that.”)—“ Well,” he continued with a sulky defiance of manner and look “ do as you like; stop here—you’ll wish you hadn’t before long, I’ll be bound! You don’t seem to hurry yourself much about speaking, so *I* shall sit down. *You* can do as you please. Now then! just let’s cut it short—do you come here in a

friendly way, to ask me to send for *my* girl down-stairs, and to show yourself the gentleman, or do you not?"

" You have written me two letters, Mr. Sherwin—"

" Yes: and took devilish good care you should get 'em—I left 'em myself."

" In writing those letters, you were either grossly deceived; and, in that case, are only to be pitied, or—"

" Pitied! what the devil do you mean by that? Nobody wants your pity here."

" Or you have been trying to deceive me; and, in that case, I have to tell you that deceit is henceforth useless, except to heap wickedness on wickedness; to add crime in the father to crime in the child. I know all—more than you suspect: more, I believe, than you would wish me to have known."

" Oh! that's your tack, is it? By God!

I expected as much the moment you came in. What! you don't believe *my* girl—don't you? You're going to fight shy and behave like a scamp—are you? Damn your infernal coolness and your aristocratic airs and graces! You shall see I'll be even with you—you shall. Ha! ha! look here!—here's the marriage certificate safe in my pocket. You won't do the honourable by my poor child—won't you? Come out! Come away! You'd better—I'm off to your father to blow the whole business: I am, as sure as my name's Sherwin!"

He struck his fist on the table, and started up, livid with passion. The screen trembled a little, and a slight rustling noise was audible behind it, just as he advanced towards me. He stopped instantly, with an oath; and looked back.

"I warn you to remain here," I said. "This morning, my father has heard all from

my lips. He has renounced me as his son, and I have left his house for ever."

He turned round quickly, staring at me with a face of mingled fury and dismay.

"Then you come to me, a beggar!" he cried, "a beggar who has taken me in about his fine family, and his fine prospects; a beggar who can't support my child—Yes! I say it again, a beggar who looks me in the face, and talks as you do. I don't care a damn about you or your father! I know my rights; I'm an Englishman, thank God! I know my rights, and *my* Margaret's rights; and I'll have them in spite of you both. Yes! you may stare as angry as you like; staring don't hurt. I'm an honest man, and *my* girl's an honest girl!"

I was looking at him, at that moment, with the contempt and the loathing that I really felt; his rage produced no other sensation in me. All higher and quicker

emotions seemed to have been dried at their sources by the events of the morning. Words far different from those I now heard, would have produced no effect on me: they had done their worst with my heart in my father's house; elsewhere, I was now deaf to them, come from whom they might.

“I say *my* girl's an honest girl,” he repeated, sitting down again; “and I dare you, or anybody—I don't care who—to prove the contrary. You told me you knew all, just now. What *all*? Come! we'll have this out before we do anything else. She says she's innocent, and I say she's innocent; and if I could find out that damnation scoundrel Mannion, and get him here, I'd make him say it too. Now, after all that, what have you got against her?—against your lawful wife; and I'll make you own her as such, and keep her as such, I can promise you!”

“If you had any sense of shame, any of the integrity to which you pretend”—I replied—“you would die rather than ask of *me* such a question as that—be silent, Sir! I am not about to address reproaches to you; I am not here to attempt to awaken you to the commonest human sense of the outrage which has ruined and dishonoured me for life—my errand in this house is simply to tell you, that the miserable falsehoods contained in your letter, will avail you as little as the foul insolence of language by which you are now endeavouring to support them. I told you before, and I now tell you again, I know all. I had been inside that house, before I saw your daughter at the door; and had heard, from *her* voice and *his* voice, what such shame and misery as you cannot comprehend forbid me to repeat. To your past duplicity, and to your present violence, I have but one answer

to give:—I will never see your daughter again. Such guilt as her's—”

“ But you *shall* see her again—by God ! you *shall* see her again ; and keep her too ! Do you think I can't see through you and your precious story ? Your father's cut you off with a shilling ; and now you want to curry favour with him again by trumping up a case against *my* girl, and trying to get her off your hands that way. But it won't do ! You've married her, my fine gentleman, and you shall stick to her ! Do you think I wouldn't a damned sight sooner believe her, than believe you ? Do you think I'll stand this ?—Here she is up-stairs, half heart-broken on my hands ; here's my wife” —(his voice lowered curiously as he said this)—“ with her mind in such a state that I'm kept away from my business, day after day, to look after her ; here's all this bother and crying and misery and fuss and mad

goings-on in my house, because you choose to behave like a scamp—and do you think I'll put up with it quietly? Damme! I'll make you do your duty to *my* girl, if she goes to the parish to appeal against you. *Your* story indeed! Who'll believe that a young female, like Margaret, could have taken to a fellow like that Mannion? and kept it all a secret from you, for ever so long, I suppose, of course!—Who'll believe that, I should like to know?"

"*I will.*"

The third voice which pronounced those words was Mrs. Sherwin's.

But was the figure that now came out from behind the screen, the same frail, shrinking figure which had so often moved my pity in the past time?—the same wan figure of sickness and sorrow, ever watching in the background of the fatal love-scenes at North Villa; ever looking like the same

spectre-shadow, when the evenings darkened in as I sat by Margaret's side?

Had the grave given up its dead?—I stood awe-struck, neither speaking nor moving while she walked towards me. She was clothed in the white garments of the sick-room—they looked on *her*, like the raiment of the tomb. Her figure, which I only remembered as drooping with premature infirmity, was now straightened convulsively to its proper height; her arms hung close at her side, like the arms of a corpse; the natural paleness of her face had turned to an earthy hue; its natural expression, so meek, so patient, so melancholy in uncomplaining sadness, was gone; and, in its stead, was left a pining stillness that never changed; a weary repose of lifeless waking—the awful seal of Death stamped ghastly on the living face; the awful look of Death staring out from the chill, shining eyes.

Her husband kept his place, and spoke to her as she stopped opposite to me. His tones were altered ; but his manner showed as little feeling as ever.

“ There now ! ” he began, “ you said you were sure he’d come here, and that you’d never take to your bed, as the Doctor wanted you, till you’d seen him and spoken to him. Well, he *has* come ; there he is. He came in while you were asleep, I rather think ; and I let him stop, so that if you woke up, and wanted to see him, you might. You can’t say—nobody can say—I havn’t given in to your whims and fancies, after that. There ! you’ve had your way, and you’ve said you believe him ; and now, if I ring for the nurse, you’ll go up-stairs at last, and make no more worry about it—Eh ? ”

She moved her head slowly, and looked at him when he said the last words. As those dying eyes met his, as that face on

which the light of life was darkening fast, turned on him, even *his* gross nature felt the shock. I saw him shrink—his sallow cheeks whitened, he moved his chair away, and said no more.

Then, she looked back to me again, and spoke. Her voice—saving that it did not tremble now—was still the same soft, low voice as ever. It was very saddening and very fearful to hear how little it had altered, and then to look on the changed face.

“I am dying,” she said to me. “Many nights have passed since that night when Margaret came home by herself, and I felt something moving down into my heart, when I looked at her, which I knew was death—many nights, since I have been used to say my prayers, and think I had said them for the last time, before I dared shut my eyes in the darkness and the quiet. I have lived on till to-day, very weary of my life ever

since that night when Margaret came in ; and yet, I could not die, because I had an atonement to make to *you*, and you never came to hear it and forgive me. I was not fit for God to take me, till you came—I know that, know it to be truth from a dream."

She paused, still looking at me, but with the same deathly blank of expression. The eye had ceased to speak already ; nothing but the voice was left.

" My husband has asked, who will believe you," she went on ; her weak tones gathering strength with every fresh word she uttered. " I have answered that *I* will ; for you have spoken the truth. Now, when the light of this world is fading from my eyes; when the breath of life grows slow and cold within me at the chill warning of the grave : here, in this earthly home of much sorrow and suffering, which I must soon quit—in the

presence of my husband—under the same roof with my sinful child—I bear you witness that you have spoken the truth. I, her mother, say it of her: Margaret Sherwin is guilty; she is no more worthy to be called your wife."

She pronounced the last words slowly, distinctly, solemnly. Till that fearful denunciation was spoken, her husband had been looking sullenly and suspiciously towards us, as we stood together; but while she uttered it, his eyes fell, and he turned away his head in silence.

He never looked up, never moved, or interrupted her, as she continued, still addressing me; but now speaking very slowly and painfully, pausing longer and longer between every sentence.

"From this room I go to my death-bed. The last words I speak in this world shall be to my husband, and shall change

his heart towards you. I have been weak of purpose," (as she said this, a strange sweetness and mournfulness began to steal over her tones), "miserably, guiltily weak, all my life. Much sorrow and pain and heavy disappointment, when I was young, did some great harm to me which I have never recovered since—so that I have lived always in fear of others, and doubt of myself; and this has made me guilty of a great sin towards *you*. Forgive me before I die! I suspected the guilt that was preparing—I foreboded the shame that was to come—they hid it from other's eyes; but, from the first, they could not hide it from mine—and yet I never warned you as I ought! *That man*"—(at those words, a change appeared in the blank expression of her eyes: they lightened suddenly with a look of terror; and her wan, wavering hands clasped and unclasped themselves restlessly)

—“*that man* had the power of Satan over me! I always shuddered before him, as I used to shudder at the darkness when I was a little child! My life has been all fear—fear of *him*; fear of my husband, and even of my daughter; fear, worse still, of my own thoughts, and of what I had discovered that should be told to *you*. When I tried to speak, you were too generous to understand me—I was afraid to think my suspicions were right, long after they should have been suspicions no longer. It was misery!—oh, what misery from then till now!”

Her voice died away for a moment in faint, breathless murmurings. She struggled to recover it, and repeated quickly, in a whisper :

“Forgive me before I die! I have made a terrible atonement; I have borne witness against the innocence of my own child—my own, own child!—unrepentant in her wicked-

ness!—I dare not bid God bless her, if they bring her to my bedside!—forgive me!—forgive me before I die!"

She took my hand, and pressed it to her cold lips. The tears gushed into my eyes, as I tried to speak to her.

"No tears!—no tears for *me*!" she murmured gently. "Basil!—let me call you as your mother would call you if she was alive: Basil! pray that I may be forgiven in the dreadful Eternity to which I go, as *you* have forgiven me! And, for *her*?—oh! who will pray for *her*, when I am gone?"

Those words were the last I heard her pronounce. My remembrance of them, and of the tone in which they were spoken, is one of those better memories which outlive the death of this world, to make part of our spiritual consciousness in the next.

Exhausted beyond the power of speaking more, though it were only in a whisper,

she tried to take my hand again, and express by a gesture the dread, irrevocable farewell. But her strength failed her even for this—failed her with awful suddenness. Her hand moved half way towards mine ; then stopped, and trembled for a moment in the air ; then fell to her side, with the fingers distorted and clenched together. She reeled where she stood ; and sank forward as I stretched out my arms to support her.

Her husband rose fretfully from his chair, and took her from me. When his eyes met mine, the look of sullen self-restraint in his countenance was crossed, in an instant, by an expression of triumphant malignity. He whispered to me : “ If you don’t change your tone by to-morrow ! ” paused ; and then, without finishing the sentence, moved away abruptly, and supported his wife to the door.

Just when her face was turned towards

where I stood, as he took her out, I thought I saw the cold, vacant eyes soften as they rested on me, and change again tenderly to the old look of patience and sadness which I remembered so well. Was my imagination misleading me? or had the light of that meek spirit shone out on earth, for the last time at parting, in token of farewell to mine? She was gone—to *me*, gone for ever—before I could look nearer, and know.

* * * *

I was told, afterwards, how she died. For the rest of that day, and throughout the night, she lay speechless, but still alive. The vital energies, frail and prostrate as they were, resisted death strangely. Even the next morning, the faint pulse still fluttered. As the day wore on, the doctors

applied fresh stimulants, and watched her in astonishment; for they had predicted her death as impending every moment, at least twelve hours before. When they spoke of this to her husband, his behaviour was noticed as very altered and unaccountable by everyone. He sulkily refused to believe that her life was in danger; he roughly accused anybody who spoke of her death, as wanting to fix on him the imputation of having ill-used her, and so being the cause of her illness; and, more than this, he angrily vindicated himself to everyone about her—even to the servants—by quoting the indulgence he had shown to her fancy for seeing me when I called, and his patience while she was (as he termed it) wandering in her mind in trying to talk to me. The doctors, suspecting how his uneasy conscience was accusing him, forebore in disgust all expostulation. Except when he was in

his daughter's room, he was shunned by everybody in the house.

Just before noon, on the second day, Mrs. Sherwin rallied a little under the stimulants administered to her, and asked to see her husband, alone. Both her words and manner gave the lie to his assertion that her faculties were impaired—it was observed by all her attendants, that, whenever she had strength to speak, her speech never wandered in the slightest degree. Her husband quitted the room more fretfully uneasy, more sullenly suspicious of the words and looks of those about him than ever—went instantly to seek his daughter—and sent her in alone to her mother's bed-side. In a few minutes, she hurriedly came out again, pale and violently agitated; and was heard to say, that she had been spoken to so unnaturally, and so shockingly, that she could not, and would not, enter

that room again until her mother was better. Better ! the father and daughter were both agreed in that ; both agreed that she was not dying, but only out of her mind !

During the afternoon, the doctors ordered that Mrs. Sherwin should not be allowed to see her husband or her child again, without their permission. There was little need of taking such a precaution to preserve the tranquillity of her last moments. As the day began to decline, she sank again into insensibility : her life was just not death, and that was all. She lingered on in this quiet way, with her eyes peacefully closed, and her breathing so gentle as to be quite inaudible, until late in the evening. Just as it grew quite dark, and the candle was lit in the sick room, the servant who was helping to watch by her, drew aside the curtain to look at her mistress ; and saw

that, though her eyes were still closed, she was smiling. A lovely, happy smile, such as had never once been seen on that sad face for years and years, was visible on it now. The girl turned round, weeping; and beckoned to the nurse to come to the bedside. When they lifted the curtains again to look at her, she was dead.

* * * *

Let me return to the day of my last visit to North Villa. More remains to be recorded, before my narrative can advance even so little further on as to pass to the morrow.

After the door had closed, and I knew that I had looked my last on Mrs. Sherwin in this world, I remained a few minutes alone in the room, until I had steadied my mind and calmed my heart sufficiently to go out again into the streets. As I walked down

the garden path to the gate, the servant, whom I had seen there on my entrance, ran after me, and eagerly entreated that I would wait one moment and speak to her.

When I stopped and looked at the girl, she burst into tears. "I'm afraid I've been doing wrong, Sir," she sobbed out, "and at this dreadful time too, when my poor mistress is dying! If you please, Sir, I *must* tell you about it!"

I gave her a little time to compose herself; and then asked what she had to say.

"I think you must have seen a man leaving a letter with me, Sir," she continued, "just when you came up to the door, a little while ago?"

"Yes: I saw him."

"It was for Miss Margaret, Sir, that letter; and I was to keep it secret; and —and—it is'n't the first I've taken in for her. It's weeks and weeks ago, Sir, that



the same man came with a letter, and gave me money to let nobody see it but Miss Margaret—and that time, Sir, he waited; and she sent me with an answer to give him, in the same secret way. And now, here's this second letter; I don't know who it comes from—but I havn't taken it to her yet; I waited to show it to you, Sir, as you came out, because—because—”

“ Why, Susan? tell me candidly why ?”

“ I hope you won't take it amiss, Sir, if I say that having lived in the family so long as I have, I can't help knowing a little about what you and Miss Margaret used to be to each other, and that something's happened wrong between you lately; and so, Sir, it seems to be very bad and dishonest in me (after first helping you to come together, as I did) to be giving her strange letters, unknown to you. They may be bad letters.

I'm sure I wouldn't wish to say anything disrespectful or that didn't become my place ; but—”

“ Go on, Susan—speak as freely and as truly to me as ever.”

“ Well Sir, Miss Margaret's been very much altered, ever since that night when she came home alone, and frightened us so. She shuts herself up in her room, and won't speak to anybody except my master ; she doesn't seem to care about anything that happens ; and sometimes she looks so at me, when I'm waiting on her, that I'm almost afraid to be in the same room with her. I've never heard her mention your name once, Sir ; and I'm fearful there's something on her mind that there ought'n't to be. He's a very shabby man, that leaves the letters—would you please to look at this ; and say whether you think it's right in me to take it up stairs ? ”



She held out a letter. I hesitated before
• I looked at it.

“ Oh Sir ! please, please do take it !” said the girl earnestly. “ I did wrong, I’m afraid, in giving her the first as I did ; but I can’t do wrong again, when my poor mistress is dying in the house. I can’t keep secrets, Sir, that may be bad secrets, at such a dreadful time as this—I couldn’t have laid down in my bed to-night, when there’s likely to be death in the house, if I hadn’t confessed what I’ve done !—And my poor mistress has always been so kind and good to us servants—better than ever we deserved !”

Weeping bitterly as she said this, the kind-hearted girl held out the letter to me once more. This time, I took it from her, and looked at the address.

Though I did not know the handwriting, still there was something in those unsteady,

irregular characters which seemed familiar to me. Was it possible that I had ever seen them before ? I tried to consider ; but my memory was confused, my mind wearied out, after all that had happened since the morning—the effort was fruitless : I gave back the letter.

“ I know quite as little about it, Susan, as you do.”

“ But ought I to take it up-stairs, Sir ?—only tell me that !”

“ It is not for *me* to say. All interest or share on my part, Susan, in what she—” (I had once uttered her name in my prayers : I dared not even pronounce it now !)—“ in what your young mistress receives, is at an end.”

“ I’m very sorry to hear you say that, Sir —very, very sorry. But, what would you advise me to do ?”

“ Let me look at the letter once more.”



On a second view, the hand-writing produced the same effect on me as before; ending too with just the same result. I returned the letter again.

“I respect your scruples, Susan; but I am not the person to remove or to justify them. Why should you not apply in this difficulty to your master?”

“I dare not, Sir—I dare not for my life! He’s been worse than ever lately; if I said as much to him as I’ve said to you, I believe he’d kill me!” She hesitated; then continued more composedly: “Well, at any rate I’ve told *you*, Sir; and that’s made my mind easier, and—and I’ll give her the letter this once, and then take in no more—if they come—unless I hear a proper account of them.”

She courtseyed; and, bidding me farewell very sadly and anxiously, returned to the house with the letter in her hand. If I had

guessed at that moment who it was written by ! If I could only have suspected what were its contents !

I left Hollyoake Square in a direction which led to some fields a little distance on. It was very strange ! but that unknown handwriting still occupied my thoughts—that wretched trifle absolutely took possession of my mind, at such a time as this ; in such a position as mine was now !

Weak and wearied, I had stopped in the fields at a very lonely spot, away from the footpath. My eyes ached at the sunlight, and I shaded them with my hand. Exactly at the same instant, the lost recollection flashed back on me so vividly that I started almost in terror. The handwriting shown me by the servant at North Villa, was the same as the handwriting on that unopened and forgotten letter in my pocket, which I had received from the servant at home—

received in the morning, just as I crossed the hall to enter my father's room!

I took out the letter — opened it with trembling fingers—and looked through the cramped, closely-written pages for the signature.

It was "ROBERT MANNION."

END OF VOL. II.

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